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THE BYZANTINE EAST AND BULGARIA – THE EASTERN ARMIES OF BYZANTIUM IN THE WARS AGAINST THE FIRST BULGARIAN EMPIRE (680–1018)

Abstract. This article deals with the engagement of the Byzantine eastern troops in the wars the empire waged against Bulgaria from the late seventh until the early eleventh centuries. To this end, both narrative and sphragistic sources are examined, and the data obtained are compared in order to get as full as possible picture of the composition of the Byzantine armies which fought against early medieval Bulgaria. Here the subject is analysed mainly from the Byzantine perspective. This helps outline certain trends in the development of the Byzantine army and the general Byzantine military strategy when Bulgaria is concerned.

Keywords: Byzantine-Bulgarian wars, Anatolian themata and tagmata, Byzantine army, early medieval Bulgaria, sigillography

The First Bulgarian polity on the Danube was born out of a war with the Byzantine Empire which led to its *de facto* recognition by the latter. Until the reign of emperor Basil II (976–1025), Bulgaria fought countless wars with Byzantium to advance its interests in the Slavic lands to the south or simply to survive as an independent entity. Many times in this period, it had the upper hand in the struggle, thus forcing the empire to respond with everything it could in order to keep its control over as greater a portion of the Balkans as possible and ensure the capital city of Constantinople with its environs was in no danger of being sacked or captured. With the new pagan state adopting the Christian religion in the mid-9th c., it rose to be the “other” empire in the region and for some time it even threatened to strip Byzantium of its ideological background as the supreme earthly power



in the *oikoumene*¹. Here we shall consider a very specific feature of the Byzantine-Bulgarian wars in the Early Middle Ages, which has mostly remained outside the scope of modern research, namely the participation of Byzantium's eastern armies in them².

There is hardly any better indicator of the Balkan front – its overall place in the defensive strategy of the Byzantine Empire, its state of preparedness, etc. – than the regular use in military campaigns of eastern regiments as part of a greater, combined Byzantine host. Unlike *themata* such as *Thrace*, which were constituted to check the Bulgarian advance towards Eastern Thrace and the capital of Constantinople, the Anatolian ones undoubtedly had other primary functions and preoccupations, most importantly to defend the East against the regular and massive Arab incursions. Despite that, the latter were also used in the West, and this for quite a long period of time.

A few preliminary notes are needed on the geographical scope of the present survey. The *Byzantine East*, as considered here, is the territory of the Byzantine Empire spanning from the Bosphorus and the Hellespont to the eastern frontier, this including the nearby islands, some of which were made into military districts (*themata*) in their own right during our period (most notably Samos and Cyprus). Thereby, it does not necessarily coincide with the Byzantine notion of what constituted the East and the West of their empire. This notion, we have to say, was prone to changes with the shifting borders and administrative reforms in the course of the centuries³. Our study focuses on the armies from the *themata*, as well as other contingents consisting of various *tagmata* referred to in the sources either as “eastern” or connected to a specific region belonging to the Byzantine East proper⁴, but for most of our period, the bulk of the Byzantine armies consisted of the former.

¹ For the latest scholarship on the Byzantine-Bulgarian conflicts in the Early Middle Ages, see D.P. HUPCHICK, *The Bulgarian-Byzantine Wars for Early Medieval Balkan Hegemony. Silver-Lined Skulls and Blinded Armies*, London 2017. On the Byzantine response to the Bulgarian threat, see D. SULLIVAN, *Byzantine Fronts and Strategies 300–1204*, [in:] *A Companion to the Byzantine Culture of War, ca. 300–1204*, ed. Y. STOURAITIS, Leiden–Boston 2018 [= BCBW, 3], p. 275–278.

² A partial exception is an article in Polish by K. MARINOW, *Liczebność wojsk bizantyńskich w anty-bułgarskich kampaniach zbrojnych związanych z masywem górskim Hemosu (VII–XI w.)*, PZH 23–24, 2022, p. 93–126, esp. the conclusions on p. 112sq. I use the opportunity to thank its author for bringing it to my attention. His study, however, deals only with the Byzantine campaigns in so far as the Haemus mountains are concerned.

³ On the basics of the Byzantine understanding of East and West, see the entries in J. NESBITT, N. OIKONOMIDES, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and the Fogg Museum of Art*, vol. I, Washington, D.C. 1991, p. 1–2; IDEM, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and the Fogg Museum of Art*, vol. III, Washington, D.C. 1996, p. 172, respectively.

⁴ On the regional *tagmata*, usually named after existing *themata*, which first appear in the sources for the late 10th c., see M. GRIGORIOU-IOANNIDOU, *Θέματα et τάγματα. Un problème de l'institution de thèmes pendant les X^e et XI^e siècles*, BF 19, 1993, p. 35–41; P.M. STRÄSSLE, *Krieg und Kriegführung in Byzanz. Die Kriege Kaiser Basileos' II. gegen die Bulgaren (976–1019)*, Köln–Weimar–Wien 2006, p. 241. On the *tagmata* as a whole, see J.F. HALDON, *Byzantine Praetorians. An Administrative*,

When and how exactly the so-called *theme system* was established – first as a military and then a military and administrative system, is still a matter of heated debate. Most of the scholars agree the first *themata* had already been founded when the Bulgars under Asparuh (681 – ca. 700) appeared on the shores of the Danube⁵.

Unlike the *thematic* troops, the *tagmatic* ones, as restructured in the 8th and 9th centuries, were full-time professional soldiers whose actions were not limited to a certain region and constituted a sort of strategic reserve available to the central government whenever needed. References to eastern *tagmata* and their commanders are deficient and of much later date when such distinctions had already become official, as evidenced by the most recent of the surviving *taktika* (*Escorial taktikon/Taktikon Oikonomidès* of ca. 971 – ca. 975)⁶. Some of these, as we shall see, are provided by the sigillographic material which compliments the narrative sources.

For practical reasons, the study is to be confined to the period of the First Bulgarian empire (ca. 680–1018). The primary information is afforded by the historical sources composed from the late 8th to the early 12th c.⁷ Apart from them, a careful investigation is needed into other, subtler pieces of evidence, such as the lead seals of Byzantine military administrators and commanders found in relative abundance on the territory of present-day Bulgaria, where, in its north-eastern part and in Romanian Dobruja, the core of the medieval state was back in the day⁸.

Institutional and Social Survey of the Opsikion and Tagmata, c. 580–900, Bonn 1984 (for the earlier period); H.-J. KÜHN, *Die byzantinische Armee im 10. und 11. Jahrhundert. Studien zur Organisation der Tagmata*, Wien 1991 [= BG.E, 2] (for the later period).

⁵ There are countless titles on the *theme system* and its establishment. Among the more recent ones, see primarily R.-J. LILIE, *Die byzantinische Reaktion auf die Ausbreitung der Araber. Studien zur Strukturwandlung des byzantinischen Staates im 7. und 8. Jhg.*, München 1976, p. 287sq; J.F. HALDON, *Recruitment and Conscription in the Byzantine Army c. 550–950. A Study on the Origins of the Stratiotika Ktemata*, Wien 1979, p. 29–40; A. KAZHDAN, *Theme*, [in:] *ODB*, vol. III, Oxford–New York 1991, p. 2034–2035; W. TREADGOLD, *Byzantium and its Army 284–1081*, Stanford, CA 1995, p. 21–27 (where its foundation is attributed to emperor Constans II (642–668) in the years 659–662); J. HALDON, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century. The Transformation of a Culture*, Cambridge 1997, p. 208sq; J.-C. CHEYNET, *L'armée byzantine: du soldat-paysan au militaire professionnel*, [in:] *Aux armes, citoyens! Conscription et armée de métier des Grecs à nos jours*, Paris 1998, p. 44–46; J. HALDON, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565–1204*, London 1999, esp. p. 112–113; A.С. МОХОВ, *Византийская армия в середине VIII – середине XI в. Развитие военно-административных структур*, Екатеринбург 2013, p. 32–54; C. ZUCKERMAN, *Learning from the Enemy and More: Studies in “Dark Century” Byzantium*, Mill 2, 2005, p. 125–134 (the author places the creation of the *theme system* as such no earlier than the second half of the 8th c.); J.-C. CHEYNET, *La mise en place des thème d'après les sceaux: les stratèges*, SBS 10, 2010, p. 1–14; S. KYRIAKIDIS, *Army Structure: Roman Continuity and Byzantine Change*, [in:] *A Companion to the Byzantine Culture of War...*, p. 237–240.

⁶ N. OIKONOMIDÈS, *Les listes de préséance byzantines des IX^e et X^e siècles*, Paris 1972, p. 263.23–26, 265.16–17, 273.6–7.

⁷ About the primary sources used herein, see W. TREADGOLD, *The Middle Byzantine Historians*, Basingstoke 2013; L. NEVILLE, *Guide to Byzantine Historical Writing*, Cambridge 2018, esp. p. 61sq.

⁸ An indispensable tool for this end is presented by the three corpora of prof. I. Jordanov where all the lead seals known to the editor up to 2009 have been published, see I. JORDANOV, *Corpus of*

As the distance between Anatolia proper and the regions heretofore mentioned is relatively long for medieval standards, the presence of such *molybdobullae* could be considered, at least in the majority of cases, as evidencing military activities on behalf of the owners of the seals, who exchanged letters with their equals and gave orders to their own subordinate officers in the region of an ongoing military operation⁹.

Our primary concern here is to establish: 1) the frequency with which armies crossed the Straits to join their western counterparts in the wars with Bulgaria and how it fluctuated over time; 2) the composition of these eastern armies; 3) the arrangements the Byzantines made in order to make such mass transfers of armed men possible and less threatening to their strategic interests elsewhere. The information thus extracted may prove instrumental to establishing certain trends in the Byzantine strategy towards its Bulgarian adversaries and the way the Byzantines waged war in general. Hopefully, it will help outline certain changes the Byzantine military organisation had undergone prior to the end of the conquest of Bulgaria by the Bulgar-slayer.

1. The information from the narrative sources

For the Byzantine Empire, the second half of the 7th c. was a crucial period. In 674–678, the city of Constantinople faced a series of Arab blockades which threatened the existence of the Christian empire as such. This was the very first instance when the new Muslim superpower besieged the capital with the clear intention and utter determination to conquer it¹⁰.

Byzantine Seals from Bulgaria, vol. I–III, Sofia 2003–2009. Unfortunately, there are no such catalogues from neighbouring countries, which were once part of the territory of the Bulgarian Empire in its heyday, and the majority of the material, unlike that from Bulgaria, has no archaeological context and therefore cannot be used for our purposes.

⁹ While some sort of private or other, unrelated to military matters, correspondence cannot be wholly excluded (there are countless possible scenarios), a few reasons, I believe, make this the less likely explanation for the finding of the majority of the examined seals: 1) military officers, even those of high rank, especially in our relatively early period, were generally not men of letters for whom maintaining a vast network of correspondents in far-removed regions may be suggested; 2) at least some of these seals are found in what was then foreign territory; 3) these seals are official (i.e. they mention office or command and often a title), while private seals may have been more suitable for correspondence of private nature. Seals of private individuals are found in relative abundance (for instance, at least one of every four seals in Jordanov's *Corpus* belong to this group, cf. I. JORDANOV, *Corpus...*, vol. III, p. 5–54). And finally, military officers certainly used to have their *boulloteria* with them while on a campaign, as evidenced by the finding of such a tool once belonging to Bryennios Batatzes, then (the middle of the 11th c.) *patrikios hypatos and stratelates of the West*, in a field near the village of Yablanovo, Kotel municipality (for the original publication of this interesting piece, see N.A. MOUCHMOV, *Un nouveau boullotirion byzantin*, B 4, 1927–1928, p. 189–191).

¹⁰ On these events preceding the Bulgars' arrival on the Danube and the period as a whole, see A.N. STRATOS, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, vol. IV, (668–685), Amsterdam 1978, p. 29–50; J. HALDON, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century...*, p. 63–66.

The Bulgar state on the Danube, according to the dominant historiographic scheme, was established after a fierce battle with the Byzantines, fought at the Ongalos (in Bulgarian Ongäl), a place whose exact location is still disputed by scholars. And this is the very first time the empire used numerous contingents from across the Straits to counter the rising menace, this being made possible by an earlier peace treaty with the Arab Caliphate. According to Theophanes the Confessor, emperor Constantine IV (668–685) led “all the themata” into Thrace¹¹ to face the Bulgars, and patriarch Nikephoros’ account also makes it clear that at least a part of the Byzantine army came from Anatolia¹². The battle ended up disastrously for the Byzantines and this paved the way for the independent Bulgarian state (or tribal federation) in the Balkan peninsula, which the former had to recognise, albeit reluctantly and as a temporary entity¹³.

As soon as the new emperor Justinian II (685–695, 705–711) signed a peace treaty with the Caliphate, then plagued by internal strife (the so-called Second Fitnah)¹⁴, he launched an offensive towards Thessalonike, targeting, as it seems,

¹¹ πάντα τὰ θέματα ἐν τῇ Θράκῃ (*Theophanis Chronographia*, AM 6171, vol. I, ed. C. DE BOOR, Leipzig 1883 (cetera: THEOPHANES), p. 358.16).

¹² *Nicephori Patriarchae Constantinopolitani Breviarium Historicum*, rec. C. MANGO, Washington, D.C. 1990 [= CFHB.SW, 13] (cetera: NIKEPHOROS), p. 90, §36.3–4.

¹³ For a discussion, see В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История на българската държава през средните векове*, vol. I.1, София 2007, p. 140–141; П. МУТАФЧИЕВЪ, *История на българския народъ*, vol. I, София 1943, p. 123–124; A.N. STRATOS, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, vol. IV, p. 105–108; *История на България*, vol. II, *Първа българска държава*, София 1981, p. 98–100 (author: П. ПЕТРОВ); В. БЕШЕВЛИЕВ, *Първобългарите. История, бит и култура*, Пловдив 2008, p. 76–78; П. ПЕТРОВ, *Образуване на българската държава*, София 1981, p. 265–287; Д. АНГЕЛОВ, С. КАШЕВ, Б. ЧОЛПАНОВ, *Българска военна история. От античността до втората четвърт на Х в.*, София 1983, p. 173–180; И. БОЖИЛОВ, В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *История на средновековна България VII–XIV век*, София 2006, p. 88–90 (author: В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ); D. ZIEMANN, *Vom Wandervolk zur Grossmacht. Die Entstehung Bulgariens im frühen Mittelalter (7.–9. Jahrhundert)*, Köln–Weimar–Wien 2007 [= КНА, 43], p. 161–162; Г. АТАНАСОВ, В. ВАЧКОВА, П. ПАВЛОВ, *Българска национална история*, vol. III, *Първо българско царство (680–1018 г.)*, Велико Търново 2015, p. 31–32 (author: Г. АТАНАСОВ); Н. КЪНЕВ, *Византия и България на Балканите. Студии върху политическата история и българо-византийското имперско противоборство на Балканския полуостров през периода VII–X в. (Византинобългарски студии II)*, Велико Търново 2021, p. 38–55; K. MARINOW, *Liczebność wojsk bizantyńskich...*, p. 102. For a more theoretical approach to the “birth” (as the author prefers to call it) of Danube Bulgaria, seen as a gradual process rather than a one-time event, see И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Раждането на Средновековна България (нова интерпретация)*, [in:] ИДЕМ, *Седем етюда по Средновековна история*, София 1995, p. 11–72, esp. p. 15sq. Cf. W. SWOBODA, *Powstanie państwa bułgarskiego na tle słowiańskich procesów państwowotwórczych na Bałkanach*, [in:] *1300–lecie państwa bułgarskiego 681–1981. Materiały z sesji naukowej*, ed. T. ZDANCEWICZ, Poznań 1983, p. 67–76; T. WASILEWSKI, *Kontrowersje wokół powstania i najstarszych dziejów państwa bułgarskiego*, [in:] *Trzyściecie wieków Bułgarii. Materiały polsko-bułgarskiej sesji naukowej*, Warszawa 28–30 X 1981, ed. J. SIATKOWSKI, Wrocław 1983, p. 181–189, esp. p. 182–188; J. HALDON, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century...*, p. 66–67; Г.Г. ЛИТАВРИН, *К проблеме становления Болгарского государства*, [in:] ИДЕМ, *Византия и славяне (сборник статей)*, Санкт-Петербург 1999, p. 192–217.

¹⁴ A.N. STRATOS, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, vol. V, *Justinian II, Leontius and Tiberius (685–711)*, Amsterdam 1980, p. 19–24; J. HALDON, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century...*, p. 70–71.

both the Slavs inhabiting the countryside and posing a constant threat to the city, and their Bulgar allies. For this purpose, Justinian summoned the “cavalry *themata*”¹⁵ to Thrace. Although initially successful in fighting his way to the metropolis of Illyricum, the emperor was ambushed in a mountain pass on his journey back to Constantinople and nearly got killed, losing a great many of his soldiers¹⁶.

Similarly, in 708, Justinian II breached the agreement with the Bulgar ruler Tervel (ca. 701 – ca. 722), whom he owed his restoration to power in 705, this time advancing northwards along the Black Sea coast. Before this march in Thrace, the “cavalry *themata*” had once again been transferred to Thrace. At Anchialos the Bulgars fell on the carelessly foraging Byzantine horsemen and after inflicting them heavy losses, forced the emperor to leave the town by sea a few days later¹⁷.

In 712 or 713, Bulgar raiders reached the precincts of the capital city of Constantinople. Shortly afterwards, the Saracens fell on Anatolia taking the town of Misthia thus aggravating the woes of the Byzantines. The *patrikios and komes of Opsikion* Georgios Bouraphos had been called to defend the area but this had unforeseen consequences with his men making an assassination attempt on the emperor of the day, Philippikos Bardanes (711–713), who was dethroned and blinded. Georgios was blinded on his turn as soon as the *asekretes* Artemios became emperor Anastasios II (713–715)¹⁸.

¹⁵ These *themata* are still units, not military districts, cf. Ж. ЖЕКОВ, *Проблемът каβαλλарικά θέματα*, [in:] *Annuaire de l'Université de Sofia “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Centre de recherches slavo-byzantines “Ivan Dujčev”*, vol. XCV(XIV), Sofia 2010, p. 167–172.

¹⁶ THEOPHANES, AM 6179–6180, p. 364.5–18; ΝΙΚΕΡНОROS, p. 92, §38.5–11 (the battle on the return march is mentioned only by Theophanes). There are lots of controversial points about these events: whether it was a single campaign or two separate campaigns; who were the Bulgars that ambushed Justinian and his army – those of Danube Bulgaria, the Bulgars of Kuber or some sort of ravaging hordes acting on their own account. Cf. В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.1, p. 159–161; П. МУТАФЧИЕВЪ, *История...*, p. 142; A.N. STRATOS, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, vol. V, p. 13–18; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 108–110 (author: П. ПЕТРОВ); П. ПЕТРОВ, *Образование...*, p. 310–329; Д. АНГЕЛОВ, С. КАШЕВ, Б. ЧОЛПАНОВ, *Българска военна история...*, p. 186–188; С. МИХАЙЛОВ, Н. ХРИСИМОВ, *Бележки за българо-византийските отношения (края на VII в. – началото на VIII в.)*, [in:] *Българите в Северното Причерноморие*, vol. VII, Великов Търново 2000, p. 256–257; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 97–98 (author: В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ); Н. КЪНЕВ, *Византия и България на Балканите...*, p. 67–79.

¹⁷ THEOPHANES, AM 6200, p. 376.13–29; ΝΙΚΕΡНОROS, p. 104, §43. В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.1, p. 174; П. МУТАФЧИЕВЪ, *История...*, p. 146; В. ПРИМОВ, *Bulgaria in the Eight Century: A General Outline*, BvG 5, 1978, p. 11–12; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 111–112 (authors: Б. ПРИМОВ, Г. ЦАНКОВА-ПЕТКОВА); В. БЕШЕВЛИЕВ, *Първобългарите...*, p. 97–98; Д. АНГЕЛОВ, С. КАШЕВ, Б. ЧОЛПАНОВ, *Българска военна история...*, p. 189; С. МИХАЙЛОВ, Н. ХРИСИМОВ, *Бележки за българо-византийските отношения...*, p. 259–260; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 107–108 (author: В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ). Some modern authors come to question the historicity of the campaign of 708, cf. G. OSTROGORSKY, *History of the Byzantine State*, Oxford 1968, p. 143, n. 1; A.N. STRATOS, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century*, vol. V, p. 153–155; D. ZIEMANN, *Vom Wandervolk zur Grossmacht...*, p. 198–199; *Българска национална история*, vol. III, p. 99 (author: Г. АТАНАСОВ); К. МАРИНОВ, *Liczebność wojsk bizantyńskich...*, p. 107.

¹⁸ ΝΙΚΕΡНОROS, p. 114–116, §47–48; В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.1, p. 175–176; В. ПРИМОВ, *Bulgaria in the Eight Century...*, p. 12–13; В. БЕШЕВЛИЕВ, *Първобългарите...*, p. 98–99; *История*

The Byzantine-Bulgarian conflict was only renewed in the middle of the 8th c. when it entered a new stage during the reign of emperor Constantine V (741–775). The new ruler made preparations for war by settling Armenians and Syrians in Thrace and rebuilding the border fortresses. The Bulgars, however, anticipated a Byzantine attack and went on an offensive themselves, reaching as far as the Anastasian Wall. This forced the emperor to act quickly and he somehow managed to drive them away with what he had at hand¹⁹.

We hear once more of the Byzantine eastern troops in reference to a conflict with Bulgaria in the second half of the 750s (variously dated between 756 and 760), when Constantine V organised his first campaign on Bulgarian soil in which the Byzantines suffered a defeat in one of the passes of Haemus (the Balkan Mountain range) called Beregaba in Theophanes' laconic narrative of these events. Among the casualties was the *patrikios and strategos of Thrakesion* Leon²⁰ which makes it clear that at least part of the eastern *themata* (perhaps those of Western Anatolia?) took part in the military campaign. It is all the more possible since after the centre of the Caliphate shifted from Syria to Mesopotamia, the Byzantine East experienced a period of relative calm unseen for the past 150 years that was only interrupted by minor raids²¹.

This enabled Constantine V to campaign regularly against Bulgaria in the subsequent years, making good use of his navy²², but the information in the sources about

на средновековна България..., p. 108–109 (author: В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ); D. ZIEMANN, *Vom Wandervolk zur Grossmacht...*, p. 201. See also W.E. КАЕГИ, *Byzantine Military Unrest 471–843. An Interpretation*, Amsterdam 1981, p. 198–200, who discusses the overthrow of Philippikos and the endemic lack of local troops to counter the Bulgar incursions in this period.

¹⁹ THEOPHANES, AM 6247, p. 429.25–30; НИКЕФОРΟΣ, p. 144, §73; В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.1, p. 201–202; П. МУТАФЧИЕВЪ, *История...*, p. 155; V. BEŠEVĹIEV, *Die Feldzüge des Kaisers Konstantin V. gegen die Bulgaren*, [in:] ИДЕМ, *Bulgarisch – Byzantinische Aufsätze*, Aldershot 1978, No. XXXI, p. 5–6; В. ПРИМОВ, *Bulgaria in the Eight Century...*, p. 22–23; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 111–112 (authors: Б. ПРИМОВ, Г. ЦАНКОВА-ПЕТКОВА), p. 120; В. БЕШЕВЛИЕВ, *Първо-българите...*, p. 105–106; Д. АНГЕЛОВ, С. КАШЕВ, Б. ЧОЛПАНОВ, *Българска военна история...*, p. 195–197; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 107–108 (author: В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ), p. 114; D. ZIEMANN, *Vom Wandervolk zur Grossmacht...*, p. 214–215; *Българска национална история*, vol. III, p. 114–116 (author: С. МИХАЙЛОВ).

²⁰ THEOPHANES, AM 6251, p. 431.6–11. In modern historiography this battle is also linked to the battle of Markelai which happened either before or after that of Beregaba, reported by Nikephoros, but unlike it, the former was a Byzantine success. Cf. В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.1, p. 207–208; V. BEŠEVĹIEV, *Die Feldzüge...*, p. 7–9; В. ПРИМОВ, *Bulgaria in the Eight Century...*, p. 24–25; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 121 (authors: Б. ПРИМОВ, Г. ЦАНКОВА-ПЕТКОВА); В. БЕШЕВЛИЕВ, *Първо-българите...*, p. 107; Д. АНГЕЛОВ, С. КАШЕВ, Б. ЧОЛПАНОВ, *Българска военна история...*, p. 203; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 115 (author: В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ); D. ZIEMANN, *Vom Wandervolk zur Grossmacht...*, p. 216–217; *Българска национална история*, vol. III, p. 116–118 (author: С. МИХАЙЛОВ).

²¹ E.g., L. BRUBAKER, J. HALDON, *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era, c. 680–850. A History*, Cambridge 2011, p. 166–167.

²² On the participation of the Byzantine navy in Constantine V's invasions of Bulgaria, see Я. ХРИСТОВ, *За участието на византийския флот в конфликтите с България в третата четвърт*

the Byzantine military activities becomes vaguer. Nevertheless, wide participation of the eastern troops seems very likely. For one of the campaigns, we have a brief note in patriarch Nikephoros' speech against Constantine V, reporting that the emperor had mustered all the available troops to meet the Bulgars in battle²³. The engagement is said to have taken place at Anchialos and hence it is a reference to the battle of 763. Unlike the other primary sources who speak of a Byzantine victory without going into much detail²⁴, in his speech, Nikephoros underlines the extremely heavy losses the Byzantines sustained. We have to say, though, that the text containing this piece of information is meant to show the iconoclast emperor in the worst possible light, and so it is only natural for its author to try to diminish his military achievements making his triumph a costly one²⁵.

A few years later, in 766, Constantine V initiated another massive campaign against the Bulgars, aiming at their complete subjugation. A 2,600-strong fleet carrying troops from all the *themata* is said to have headed to the Danube delta, while a portion of the army, led by the emperor, made camp south of the Haemus. It did not go well, though, for a sea storm sunk a great many ships and eventually, the whole campaign was called off²⁶.

Some two thousand ships might have participated in the combined offensive of 774, and again it is almost certain the eastern contingents had been transferred to the Balkans. It is not entirely clear either what was meant with ἐκ πάντων τῶν θεμάτων in a passage of text in Theophanes' *Chronographia*, referring to

на VIII в., [in:] *Ruler, State and Church on the Balkans in the Middle Ages. In Honour of the 60th Anniversary of Professor Dr. Plamen Pavlov*, pars 1, Велико Търново 2020, p. 606–625; Y. HRISTOV, D. KOSTADINOVA, *Byzantine Battleships and Military Transport Vessels along the Hostile Shores*, SCer 11, 2021, p. 579–609, where the overall performance of the naval squadrons in these campaigns is judged negatively. For the role of the navy in the Byzantine-Bulgarian wars of the Early Middle Ages in general and a different assessment of its usefulness, see K. MARINOW, *Zadania floty cesarskiej w wojnach bizantyńsko-bułgarskich (VII–XI w.)*, [in:] *Byzantina Europea. Księga jubileuszowa ofiarowana Profesorowi Waldemarowi Ceranowi*, ed. M. KOKOSZKO, M.J. LESZKA, Łódź 2007 [= BL, 11], p. 381–392.

²³ *Nicephori Archiepiscopi Constantinopolitani Opera quae reperiri potuerunt omnia*, [in:] PG, vol. C, ed. J.-P. MIGNE, Paris 1863, p. 508, §72.

²⁴ THEOPHANES, AM 6254, p. 432.29 – 433.14; NIKEPHOROS, p. 148.7 – 150.22.

²⁵ V. BEŠEVLIJEV, *Die Feldzüge...*, p. 10–11; B. PRIMOV, *Bulgaria in the Eight Century...*, p. 25–26; В. БЕШЕВЛИЕВ, *Първобългарите...*, p. 115–117. For the latest discussion, see D. ZIEMANN, *Vom Wandervolk zur Grossmacht...*, p. 219–220; Я. ХРИСТОВ, *За участието на византийския флот...*, p. 613–614, 615–618; Y. HRISTOV, D. KOSTADINOVA, *Byzantine Battleships...*, p. 589–591, 593–601; K. MARINOW, *Liczebność wojsk bizantyńskich...*, p. 107.

²⁶ THEOPHANES, AM 6257, p. 437.19–25; NIKEPHOROS, p. 156, §82. See В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.1, p. 216–217; V. BEŠEVLIJEV, *Die Feldzüge...*, p. 14; B. PRIMOV, *Bulgaria in the Eight Century...*, p. 26–27; В. БЕШЕВЛИЕВ, *Първобългарите...*, p. 123–124; Д. АНГЕЛОВ, С. КАШЕВ, Б. ЧОЛПАНОВ, *Българска военна история...*, p. 206–209; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 117–118 (author: В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ); D. ZIEMANN, *Vom Wandervolk zur Grossmacht...*, p. 227–228; Я. ХРИСТОВ, *За участието на византийския флот...*, p. 614–615; Y. HRISTOV, D. KOSTADINOVA, *Byzantine Battleships...*, p. 591–592; K. MARINOW, *Liczebność wojsk bizantyńskich...*, p. 108.

Constantine V's concern to man the garrisons of the newly built *kastra*, after a formal truce with the Bulgars had been concluded earlier²⁷. In all probability, it means that numerous soldiers from various *themata* (including some of the Anatolian ones) were used in this capacity²⁸.

These measures were indeed not in vain for the treaty was not to last, this time being infringed by both parties a few months later²⁹. Constantine V recruited a huge army (80-thousand-strong, if we believe Theophanes the Confessor whose figures seem greatly exaggerated³⁰) which included in its ranks the *Thrakesians* and *tagmata* from the *Optimatoi*³¹, both in Western Asia Minor. It met the Bulgars at Lithosoria, taking them by surprise and routing them. This victory was followed by a triumphal entry into the capital city of Constantinople, the Byzantine host laden with booty and captives³².

After this success, another offensive was launched in which 12-thousand horsemen embarked on transport vessels commanded by all the naval *strategoï*. The emperor, on the other hand, chose the land route along the seashore, but as soon as the ships reached Mesembria, many of them were sunk by strong winds. For one

²⁷ THEOPHANES, AM 6265, p. 447.1–9. В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.1, p. 227–229; V. BEŠEVĹIEV, *Die Feldzüge...*, p. 15; B. ПРИМОВ, *Bulgaria in the Eight Century...*, p. 32–33; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 128 (authors: Б. ПРИМОВ, Г. ЦАНКОВА-ПЕТКОВА); Д. АНГЕЛОВ, С. КАШЕВ, Б. ЧОЛПАНОВ, *Българска военна история...*, p. 209–210; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 118 (author: В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ); D. ZIEMANN, *Vom Wandervolk zur Grossmacht...*, p. 230–231; *Българска национална история*, vol. III, p. 128–129 (author: П. ПАВЛОВ); K. MARINOW, *Liczebność wojsk bizantyńskich...*, p. 108–109.

²⁸ This is also the way V. Zlatarski and V. Beševliev grasp the meaning of this passage, cf. В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.1, p. 228–229; V. BEŠEVĹIEV, *Die Feldzüge...*, p. 15; В. БЕШЕВЛИЕВ, *Първобългарите...*, p. 125–126.

²⁹ The dating of the campaign is uncertain, cf. D. ZIEMANN, *Vom Wandervolk zur Grossmacht...*, p. 232–233.

³⁰ See in particular K. MARINOW, *Liczebność wojsk bizantyńskich...*, p. 109.

³¹ It is worth noting that the *Optimatoi*, once part of the *Opsikion*, had a distinct organisation from the other *themata* and therefore the mention of *tagmata* is not an error on the part of Theophanes but reflects its specific functions instead (cf. J.F. HALDON, *Byzantine Praetorians...*, p. 223–226; C. FOSS, *Optimatoi*, [in:] *ODB*, vol. III, Oxford–New York 1991, p. 1529).

³² THEOPHANES, AM 6265, p. 447.10–26. This defeat is traditionally overlooked, especially in modern Bulgarian historiography, perhaps because it does not fit the pattern of Bulgaria overcoming the internal crisis and consolidating its positions under Telerig (768–777): В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.1, p. 230–232; V. BEŠEVĹIEV, *Die Feldzüge...*, p. 15–16; B. ПРИМОВ, *Bulgaria in the Eight Century...*, p. 33–34; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 128 (authors: Б. ПРИМОВ, Г. ЦАНКОВА-ПЕТКОВА); В. БЕШЕВЛИЕВ, *Първобългарите...*, p. 127–128; Д. АНГЕЛОВ, С. КАШЕВ, Б. ЧОЛПАНОВ, *Българска военна история...*, p. 210–211; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 119 (author: В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ); D. ZIEMANN, *Vom Wandervolk zur Grossmacht...*, p. 232–233; *Българска национална история*, vol. III, p. 130–131 (author: П. ПАВЛОВ). See also the note in K. МАРИНОВ, *Стратегическата роля на Старопланинската и Средногорската вериги в светлината на българо-византийските военни сблъсъци през VII–IX век*, ИРИМГ 2, 2014, p. 112 and n. 10, where the author, unlike most of his predecessors, does not deny the significance of this engagement.

more time, the Byzantine host had to turn back, its fleet having been decimated by the adverse weather conditions³³.

The death of the warrior emperor and fervent iconoclast Constantine V (14th September 775) brought relative peace to the Bulgar side. The khanate itself entered a period of internal stabilisation after the turmoil of the mid-8th c. which also meant that the tides in the struggle with Byzantium were gradually turning in its favour. The vigorous conflict was renewed in the early 790s and in 792 the two clashed in a major battle at Markelai which the Bulgars eventually won. For the Byzantines, it was a tough battle, as evidenced by the long list of victims among the dignitaries and officers. In the death roll, one finds the names of the *magistros* Michael Lachanodrakon, an infamous iconoclast whose career until that moment had passed entirely in the Byzantine East³⁴. The list is complemented by the *patrikios* Bardas, the *protospatharios* Stephanos Hameas and the *strategoi* Niketas and Theognostos³⁵ of whom nothing more is said³⁶. Even solely with reference to Michael Lachanodrakon in mind, it would be fairly safe to presume that some regiments of the eastern *themata* took part in the battle of Markelai in 792, despite the Byzantine preoccupation with the rebellion in *Armeniakon*, which had broken out earlier in the same year³⁷.

A few years later, in 796, the emperor Constantine VI (780–797) refused to pay the tribute due to the Bulgar khan Kardam (777 – after 796). This decision led to open hostilities and the two armies met at Bersinikia, just north of Adrianople³⁸, this time, however, without engaging in a proper battle³⁹. What interests us here

³³ THEOPHANES, AM 6266, p. 447.29 – 448.4; V. BEŠEVĽIEV, *Die Feldzüge...*, p. 16; B. PRIMOV, *Bulgaria in the Eight Century...*, p. 34; B. БЕШЕВЛИЕВ, *Първобългарите...*, p. 128; D. ZIEMANN, *Vom Wandervolk zur Grossmacht...*, p. 233.

³⁴ He was in *Armeniakon* as recently as 790 (cf. PMZ 5027 with references to the sources).

³⁵ In W. Treadgold's view, Niketas and Theognostos *apparently commanded the themes of Thrace and Macedonia* (W. TREADGOLD, *The Byzantine Revival 780–842*, Stanford, CA 1988, p. 100). This, however, is far from evident.

³⁶ THEOPHANES, AM 6283, p. 467.27 – 468.7. В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.1, p. 242–243; П. МУТАФИЧЕВЪ, *История...*, p. 173–174; B. PRIMOV, *Bulgaria in the Eight Century...*, p. 37; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 130 (authors: Б. ПРИМОВ, Г. ЦАНКОВА-ПЕТКОВА); В. БЕШЕВЛИЕВ, *Първобългарите...*, p. 133–134; Д. АНГЕЛОВ, С. КАШЕВ, Б. ЧОЛПАНОВ, *Българска военна история...*, p. 214–216; W. TREADGOLD, *The Byzantine Revival...*, p. 100; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 122 (author: В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ); D. ZIEMANN, *Vom Wandervolk zur Grossmacht...*, p. 237; P. SORHOULIS, *Byzantium and Bulgaria, 775–831*, Leiden–Boston 2012 [= ЕСЕЕМА, 16], p. 168–169; *Българска национална история*, vol. III, p. 132–133 (author: П. ПАВЛОВ); K. MARINOW, *Liczebność wojsk bizantyńskich...*, p. 103.

³⁷ On it, see W. TREADGOLD, *The Byzantine Revival...*, p. 100; P. SORHOULIS, *Byzantium and Bulgaria...*, p. 154, 167–168.

³⁸ It is more often than not spelt Versinikia, in accordance with the Byzantine and Modern Greek pronunciation. On the fortress and its disputed location, see P. SOUSTAL, *TIB*, vol. VI, *Thrakien*, Wien 1991, p. 205.

³⁹ THEOPHANES, AM 6288, p. 470.10–21; В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.1, p. 243–246; П. МУТАФИЧЕВЪ, *История...*, p. 174; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 130 (authors: Б. ПРИМОВ, Г. ЦАН-

is the evidence of Theophanes of the περατικὰ θέματα which were summoned on the emperor's command. The latter are identified by most of the scholars with the *themata* of Asia Minor⁴⁰.

It was not until the bloody war of 811 that we hear once again of the eastern armies of the Byzantine Empire acting against the Bulgar state ruled by the capable khan Krum (before 803 – 814). In that year the emperor Nikephoros I (802–811) mounted a large-scale offensive against the Bulgar capital of Pliska using the *themata* of Thrace (i.e., *Thrace* and *Macedonia*) but also the *peratic* ones (*Anatolikon* is mentioned by name), nearly all of the *tagmata* (namely the *exkoubitoi*, *vigla*, *hikanatoi*) and a numerous armed mob⁴¹. This levying *en masse* happened in the midst of a succession crisis in the Abbasid Caliphate between the sons of the great caliph Harun al-Rashid (786–809) which would not be resolved until 813. After sacking Pliska, the Byzantine host, led by none other than the emperor himself, proceeded to its own territory but was ambushed in a mountain pass of Haemus where nearly the entire army perished, including Nikephoros himself. All this and the aftermath of the battle are well-known and need not be discussed here in greater detail⁴².

КОВА-ПЕТКОВА); В. БЕШЕВЛИЕВ, *Първобългарите...*, p. 134–135; W. TREADGOLD, *The Byzantine Revival...*, p. 106; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 123 (author: В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ); D. ZIEMANN, *Vom Wandervolk zur Grossmacht...*, p. 238–239; P. SORHOULIS, *Byzantium and Bulgaria...*, p. 170–171; *Българска национална история*, vol. III, p. 135–136 (author: П. ПАВЛОВ).

⁴⁰ See, for instance, *История на България*, vol. II, p. 130 (authors: Б. ПРИМОВ, Г. ЦАНКОВА-ПЕТКОВА); Д. АНГЕЛОВ, С. КАШЕВ, Б. ЧОЛПАНОВ, *Българска военна история...*, p. 216; W. TREADGOLD, *The Byzantine Revival...*, p. 106; P. SORHOULIS, *Byzantium and Bulgaria...*, p. 153, 170.

⁴¹ On the composition of the Byzantine army in this campaign, largely known from the list of those who met their ends in the decisive battle, see THEOPHANES, AM 6303, p. 490.4–7, 491.9–13; I. DUJČEV, *La Chronique byzantine de l'an 811*, [in:] IDEM, *Medioevo byzantino-slavo*, vol. II, Roma 1968, p. 432.1 – 438.99. The latter source actually speaks of ὄλα τὰ τάγματα (p. 432.6). Cf. also the latest study on this anonymous chronicle: P. STEPHENSON, “About the Emperor Nikephoros and How He Leaves His Bones in Bulgaria”: A Context for the Controversial Chronicle of 811, DOP 60, 2006, p. 87–109.

⁴² The decisive battle is usually referred to, in modern Bulgarian historiography alone, as the “battle of Vărbitsa pass” or collectively as “the battle of Pliska”. It has been discussed countless times before. See, e.g., В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.1, p. 255–259; П. МУТАФЧИЕВЪ, *История...*, p. 180–182; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 134–138 (author: Б. ПРИМОВ); В. БЕШЕВЛИЕВ, *Първобългарите...*, p. 141–150; Д. АНГЕЛОВ, С. КАШЕВ, Б. ЧОЛПАНОВ, *Българска военна история...*, p. 226–231; W. TREADGOLD, *The Byzantine Revival...*, p. 170–174; J. SHEPARD, *Slavs and Bulgars*, [in:] *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. II, C. 700 – c. 900, ed. R. MCKITTERICK, Cambridge 1995, p. 235; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 128–130 (author: В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ); D. ZIEMANN, *Vom Wandervolk zur Grossmacht...*, p. 247–249; J. HALDON, *The Byzantine Wars*, Stroud 2008, p. 73–79; E.N. LUTTWAK, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, Cambridge, MA–London 2009, p. 176–185; P. SORHOULIS, *Byzantium and Bulgaria...*, p. 195–216; *Българска национална история*, vol. III, p. 147–152 (author: Г. АТАНАСОВ); П. ПАВЛОВ, *Династията на Крум*, София 2019, p. 39–43. On the Byzantine-Bulgarian conflict during the reign of Krum, see Н. КЪНЕВ, *Бележки върху измеренията на българо-византийския конфликт при управлението на кан Крум*, [in:] *Ruler, State and Church...*, p. 675–703; K. MARINOW, *Liczebność wojsk bizantyńskich...*, p. 103–104.

The battle of 811 delivered a heavy blow on the Byzantine ambition to end the Bulgar threat once and for all but the empire received some time for recovery, since Bulgaria, fighting on its own ground, had been badly pillaged by the enemy, allegedly suffering severe losses and its capital Pliska left devastated. Nevertheless, the war was renewed the following year with the Bulgars' capturing of Debelton. At this point, the new Byzantine emperor Michael I Rangabe (811–813) and his host were concentrated around Tzouroulon but upon hearing the news of the Bulgarian advance, it was on the brink of mutiny (especially the detachments of *Opsikion* and *Thrakesion*, as reported by Theophanes). The efforts to raise their morale with donatives were in vain and they left much of the *themata of Thrace* and *Macedonia* to the mercy of the Bulgars⁴³.

In a strange turn of events, the victorious Krum offered peace to the Byzantines but the seemingly acceptable terms were rejected by them, probably encouraged by a recent victory in the East, and thus the war carried on⁴⁴. However, next year's attempt to quell the Bulgar onslaught was no more successful than that of 812. The decisive battle was fought at Bersinikia, the site of the abortive battle of 796. This time the two armies joined the fight but at the end of it, the Byzantines were once again on the losing side, evidently turning to flight at the first clash with the foe⁴⁵. Our sources are relatively abundant, at least for the standards of the early 9th c., and provide enough information that could be used to determine the composition of the Byzantine host participating in the aforementioned battle with greater precision. Theophanes testifies that the emperor Michael Rangabe ordered all the *themata* to cross to Thrace and himself left Constantinople with the *tagmata*. Among the *strategoï* the chronicler mentions by name Leon, *patrikios and strategos of Anatolikon*, and Ioannes Aplakes, *patrikios and strategos of Macedonia*⁴⁶. The so-called *Scriptor incertus*, an anonymous chronicle written by a contemporary of the events

⁴³ THEOPHANES, AM 6304, p. 495.20 – 496.5; В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.1, p. 261–262; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 138 (author: Б. ПРИМОВ); Д. АНГЕЛОВ, С. КАШЕВ, Б. ЧОЛПАНОВ, *Българска военна история...*, p. 332–334; W. TREADGOLD, *The Byzantine Revival...*, p. 180–181; Θ. ΚΟΡΡΕΣ, *Λέων Ε' ο Αρμένιος και η εποχή του. Μια κρίσιμη δεκαετία για το Βυζάντιο (811–820)*, Θεσσαλονίκη 1996, p. 29–30; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 132 (author: В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ); P. SORHOULIS, *Byzantium and Bulgaria...*, p. 222–225; П. ПАВЛОВ, *Династията на Крум...*, p. 43.

⁴⁴ For the scholarly discussion and a detailed analysis of the source material, cf. Θ. ΚΟΡΡΕΣ, *Λέων Ε' ο Αρμένιος...*, p. 32–43.

⁴⁵ On the battle of Bersinikia of 813 and the subsequent events in Byzantium, see В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.1, p. 266–270; П. МУТАФЧИЕВЪ, *История...*, p. 184–185; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 138–139 (author: Б. ПРИМОВ); В. БЕШЕВЛИЕВ, *Първобългарите...*, p. 158–160; Д. АНГЕЛОВ, С. КАШЕВ, Б. ЧОЛПАНОВ, *Българска военна история...*, p. 234–230; W. TREADGOLD, *The Byzantine Revival...*, p. 185–189; Θ. ΚΟΡΡΕΣ, *Λέων Ε' ο Αρμένιος...*, p. 46–54; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 134–135 (author: В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ); D. ZIEMANN, *Vom Wandervolk zur Grossmacht...*, p. 276–278; P. SORHOULIS, *Byzantium and Bulgaria...*, p. 234–245; *Българска национална история*, vol. III, p. 155–158 (author: Г. АТАНАСОВ); П. ПАВЛОВ, *Династията на Крум...*, p. 46–48.

⁴⁶ THEOPHANES, AM 6305, p. 500.2 – 501.3, 501.27 – 502.3.

described, provides further details. According to its author, the Byzantine army had in its ranks even the guards of the border *kleisourai* with Syria (Lycaonians, Cilicians, Isaurians, Cappadocians and Galatians)⁴⁷. The later history of Ioannes Skylitzes written in the final years of the 11th c., although not particularly useful in this regard, makes the battle more contested with the Byzantine defeat coming on this occasion not so much due to the Bulgars' prowess, greater determination and better preparation, as it had been in the previous two years, but as a result of an act of treachery on the part of the *strategos of Anatolikon* Leon the Armenian, who made good use of his betrayal and the loss of popularity of the emperor Michael I, by claiming the throne for himself (813–820)⁴⁸.

Krum's death († 814) gave the Byzantines the respite they needed so badly and, with it, the chance to go on an offensive. Indeed, they fought with some success in Thrace under the orders of the new emperor Leon V but, unfortunately, the sources are silent on to what armies the empire employed in this campaign⁴⁹. What befell the Bulgars, rather unexpectedly, convinced them to sign a formal peace treaty in 815/816 which was to last until khan Omurtag's death († after 826) and beyond⁵⁰.

The open hostilities between the two powers began anew in the 850s or early 860s. The conflict ended up as soon as the Bulgarian ruler Boris (852–889) was baptised by Byzantine missionaries as a result of a peace treaty. But was there a Byzantine campaign towards Bulgarian Thrace after all? The only indication of such is found in the chronicle of Symeon Magistros and Logothetes who, in a short

⁴⁷ *Scriptor Incertus*, ed. F. IADEVAIA, Messina 1987, p. 40.34 – 44.150 (esp. p. 40.37–44). On p. 41.70–71 Aplakes is at the head of Macedonians (confirmed by Theophanes) and Thrakesians. At a slightly later moment, though (p. 42.77), the author speaks of Thracians fighting at his side and this reading is to be preferred in the first instance as well (see also the scholarly works cited above).

⁴⁸ *Ioannis Scylitzae Synopsis Historiarum*, rec. J. THURN, Berlin–New York 1973 [= *CFHB.SBe*, 5] (cetera: SKYLITZES), p. 5.75sq. The same implication is present in other, earlier chronicles, such as the one written by Ioseph Genesios, himself among the sources of Skylitzes (*Iosephi Genesii Rerum libri quattuor*, rec. A. LESMÜLER-WERNER, J. THURN, Berlin–New York 1978 [= *CFHB.SBe*, 14] (cetera: GENESIOS), esp. p. 3.21 – 4.27), and the so-called *Theophanes Continuatus* (*Chronographiae quae Theophanis Continuati nomine fertur*, libri I–IV, rec. M. FEATHERSTONE, J. SIGNES CODOÑER, Boston–Berlin 2015 [= *CFHB.SBe*, 53] (cetera: THEOPHANES CONTINUATUS, libri I–IV), esp. p. 26.28–29).

⁴⁹ GENESIOS, p. 10.4–19; THEOPHANES CONTINUATUS, libri I–IV, p. 40.1 – 42.31. P. Sophoulis suggests that the emperor was accompanied by a substantial, but mobile, expeditionary force which was probably made up of the *tagmata* and thematic contingents from Asia Minor (P. SOPHOULIS, *Byzantium and Bulgaria...*, p. 268).

⁵⁰ On the treaty and the preceding clashes, see В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.1, p. 298–304; П. МУТАФЧИЕВЪ, *История...*, p. 198–200; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 147–150 (author: Б. ПРИМОВ); W.T. TREADGOLD, *The Bulgars' Treaty with the Byzantines in 816*, *RSBS* 4, 1984, p. 213–220; W. TREADGOLD, *The Byzantine Revival...*, p. 214–219; Θ. ΚΟΡΡΕΣ, *Λέων Ε' ο Αρμένιος...*, p. 94–97; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 144–147 (author: В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ); P. SOPHOULIS, *Byzantium and Bulgaria...*, p. 266–286; *Българска национална история*, vol. III, p. 171–177 (author: Г. АТАНАСОВ).

note, mentions a combined land and sea attack on the Bulgars led by the emperor Michael III (842–867) and the *kaisar* Bardas, and in a short chronicle which records the events in a similar manner, save for the participation of the *kaisar*. Both accounts are insufficient to allow for a reconstruction of the military expeditions in question⁵¹, although they might have contributed in the end, along with other factors at work, to the Christianisation of Bulgaria⁵². If this campaign was more than a mere show of force, and it is likely that it indeed was despite the dearth of evidence, then the participation of at least part of the Anatolian contingents and the *tagmata* is almost certain. It will have happened shortly after the great victory Petronas, Bardas' brother, won against the emir of Melitene⁵³ and thus some of the troops under his command were quickly transferred to the Balkans to fight Boris' khanate.

The Christianisation of Bulgaria marks the beginning of a period of peace with Byzantium, which was only broken in 894 with the “first commercial war in Europe” that grew to be a war of attrition lasting with some interruptions to the death of the ambitious Bulgarian ruler Symeon (893–927). The first chance the Byzantines had to face Symeon's host with very much their whole field army, including the *tagmata* and the eastern *themata*, was in 896. The two armies clashed at Boulgarophygon but the battle did not go as planned for the Byzantines and they were soundly defeated suffering extremely heavy losses that made the anonymous author of *Theophanes Continuatus* make a lamenting remark that πάντες ἀπώλοντο⁵⁴.

⁵¹ *Symeonis Magistri et Logothetae Chronicon*, rec. S. WAHLGREN, Berlin–New York 2006 [= *CFHB. SBe*, 44.1] (cetera: SYMEON MAGISTROS AND LOGOTHETES), p. 243.215. It affords a firm *terminus post quem* for the events in question, since the date of Bardas' promotion to *kaisar* is known – 22nd April 862 (cf. *PMZ* 791/согр.; cf. Н. КЪНЕВ, *Византийските кесари през IX–X в., свидетелствани по сфрагистични данни*, АДСВ 37, 2006, p. 170–171). For the similar account of the short chronicle, see *Chronica byzantina breviora*, No. 110, vol. I, rec. P. SCHREINER, Wien 1975 [= *CFHB.SV*, 12.1], p. 677.1–5.

⁵² On the conversion of Bulgaria to Christianity and the possible Byzantine campaign(s) beforehand, see, among other titles, В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История на българската държава през средните векове*, vol. I.2, София 2007, p. 18sq; П. МУТАФЧИЕВЪ, *История...*, p. 220–222, 224–230; В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ, *Княз Борис Първи. България през втората половина на IX век*, София 1969, p. 55–86; D. OBOLENSKY, *The Byzantine Commonwealth. Eastern Europe, 500–1453*, New York–Washington, D.C. 1971, p. 84; T. WASILEWSKI, *Bizancjum i Słowianie w IX wieku. Studia z dziejów stosunków politycznych i kulturalnych*, Warszawa 1972, p. 103–119; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 214–218 (author: В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ); Д. АНГЕЛОВ, С. КАШЕВ, Б. ЧОЛПАНОВ, *Българска военна история...*, p. 253; J.V.A. FINE, *The Early Medieval Balkans. A Critical Survey from the Sixth to the Late Twelfth Century*, Ann Arbor, MI 1991, p. 117–119; J. SHEPARD, *Slavs and Bulgars...*, p. 239–240; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 170–174 (author: В. ГЮЗЕЛЕВ); D. ZIEMANN, *Vom Wandervolk zur Grossmacht...*, p. 356–362. In some of these accounts, the effect the military conflict with the Byzantine Empire had on the decision of Boris is highly exaggerated. Furthermore, in a most recent paper, this campaign is dismissed as outright fictitious: K. BARDOLA, *The Birth of the Myth about the Byzantine-Bulgarian War of 863*, *SCer* 13, 2023, p. 191–214.

⁵³ On it, see J. HALDON, *The Byzantine Wars...*, p. 88–89.

⁵⁴ This is a clear overstatement but it should not diminish the fact that many a Byzantine soldier and officer perished, among them the *patrikios* and *protovestiaris* Theodosios: THEOPHANES CONTINU-

Perhaps one of the biggest armies the Byzantines have ever mustered for a war against Bulgaria was that of 917 when the uneasy relations between the two states escalated once again. The continuators of the chronicles of Theophanes and Georgios the Monk, Symeon the Magistros and Logothetes, and Ioannes Skylitzes inform us in detail of the preparations for it: an alliance with the Pechenegs north of the Danube delta⁵⁵ and a peace treaty with the Arabs were negotiated; the pay was distributed to the *tagmata*, by that time serving in the East, and the latter, along with the eastern *themata*, were transferred to Thrace to wage war against the Bulgarians. In charge of the combined army was the *magistros* and *domestikos ton Scholon* Leon Phokas. Apart from the commander-in-chief, the sources also mention the *domestikoi* of the *exkoubitoi* and the *hikanatoi*, Ioannes Grapson and the son of Maroules (or Olbianos Maroules in Skylitzes), respectively; Melias, commander of an Armenian contingent; the brothers Romanos and Leon Argyros, and Bardas Phokas who commanded other, unnamed *tagmata*. The general impression the evidence leaves is that a vast majority of the Byzantine standing army and reserves (part-time and fully professional soldiers alike) participated in this campaign⁵⁶.

Despite these thorough preparations for war, the Byzantine campaign ended on the plains where the small river Achelous flows into the Black Sea with probably the greatest military victory for Bulgaria in its entire medieval history. Many

ATUS, IOANNES CAMENIATA, SYMEON MAGISTER, GEORGIUS MONACHUS, rec. I. BEKKER, Bonn 1838 [= CSHB, 45] (cetera: THEOPHANES CONTINUATUS), p. 360.8–17; and the other important sources: GEORGIUS MONACHUS, cognomento Hamartolus, *Chronicon Breve*, [in:] PG, vol. CX, ed. J.-P. MIGNE, Paris 1863 (cetera: GEORGIUS MONACHOS), col. 1099–1100, §14; SYMEON MAGISTROS AND LOGOTHETES, p. 277.126–132; SKYLITZES, p. 178.46–56. See also В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.2, p. 316–319; П. МУТАФЧИЕВЪ, *История...*, p. 283–284; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 282–283 (author: И. БОЖИЛОВ); И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Цар Симеон Велики (893–927). Златният век на Средновековна България*, София 1983, p. 93–94; Д. АНГЕЛОВ, С. КАШЕВ, Б. ЧОЛПАНОВ, *Българска военна история...*, p. 261; S. TOUGHER, *The Reign of Leo VI (886–912). Politics and People*, Leiden–Boston–Köln 1997 [= Mm, 15], p. 178–180; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 246 (author: И. БОЖИЛОВ); M. J. LESZKA, *Symeon I Wielki a Bizancjum. Z dziejów stosunków bułgarsko-bizantyńskich w latach 893–927*, Łódź 2013 [=BL, 15], p. 92–95; Н. КЪНЕВ, *Византия и България на Балканите...*, p. 163–165.

⁵⁵ Similar arrangements are recommended by the emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos (913/944–959) in his *De Administrando Imperio* (cf. CONSTANTINE PORPHYROGENITUS, *De Administrando Imperio*, ed. Gy. MORAVCSIK, trans. R. J. H. JENKINS, Washington, D.C. 1967, p. 52, §5).

⁵⁶ This is reinforced by phrases such as ...καὶ οἱ ἄλλοι πάντες στρατηγοὶ τῶν θεμάτων at the end of the list of officers (cf. THEOPHANES CONTINUATUS, p. 386.23 – 387.7, 388.13 – 389.10; GEORGIUS MONACHOS, col. 1136, §10; col. 1136–1137, §15; SYMEON MAGISTROS AND LOGOTHETES, p. 302.106 – 303.112, 304.129–147; SKYLITZES, p. 201.49 – 202.55, 202.71 – 203.93). On the Byzantine army and its commanders in the battle of Achelous, see И. ЙОРДАНОВ, *Битката при Ахелой през 917 г.: численост и състав на византийската армия. Просопография на участниците (Приносът на сфрагистиката)*, [in:] *Emperor Symeon's Bulgaria in the History of Europe's South-East. 1100 Years from the Battle of Achelous*, vol. I, Sofia 2018, p. 33–60; Н. КЪНЕВ, *Византия и България на Балканите...*, p. 243–247; K. MARINOW, *Liczebność wojsk bizantyńskich...*, p. 110–111; N. KANEV, *Again on the Question of the Number of the Byzantine Army in the Battle of Achelous* (forthcoming).

an ordinary soldier and commanding officer ran for their lives but were butchered in the rout. The *domestikos* Leon Phokas saved himself behind the walls of Mesembria, whereas his adviser Konstantinos Lips and the aforementioned Ioannes Grapson could not. This battle is both well-documented and discussed in the secondary literature many times before, thus we shall abstain from further comments⁵⁷. Suffice it to say that the pile of bones Leon the Deacon speaks of was a terrifying reminder of what befell the Byzantines on that day of August 917, still perfectly visible some fifty years later when the historian visited the site of the battle⁵⁸.

The situation after the disaster of Achelous, the planned Pecheneg incursion also having failed, had to be mended somehow and there was little time, for Symeon was advancing in haste towards Constantinople trying to make good use of his earlier triumph. The Byzantines assembled everyone they could (including the *hetaireia*, unaffected by the previous battle) and met the Bulgarians at Katasyrtai. The result of this engagement is slightly confused in the sources but most of them insist the Bulgarians were once again the victors, literally destroying what was left of the Byzantine field army in the hinterland of the capital city, which, had it not had its sturdy walls, would have been left at the mercy of Symeon. The latter, however, had to deal first with the unruly Serbs and hence rode off leaving the fate of Constantinople to be decided at a later stage⁵⁹.

Indeed, Symeon attacked the Byzantine capital in 921 and burnt the palaces in Pege and Stenon, after he had defeated an army of select troops from the *basilikoi*, the *hetaireia*, other *tagmata* and the imperial fleet under the general leadership of the *raiktor* Ioannes⁶⁰. These regiments were not particularly numerous,

⁵⁷ Primary sources: THEOPHANES CONTINUATUS, p. 389.10–19; GEORGIOS MONACHOS, col. 1137, §16; SYMEON MAGISTROS AND LOGOTHETES, p. 304.147 – 305.156; SKYLITZES, p. 203.93 – 204.17 (a unique account of the battle according to which the Byzantines initially had the upper hand but fled after an unfortunate accident with the horse of the commander-in-chief, whom the rest of the army thought dead. It was the confusion it caused, along with Symeon's timely and courageous actions, that won the day for the Bulgarian side). Modern historiography: В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.2, p. 383–391; П. МУТАФЧИЕВЪ, *История...*, p. 302–303; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 286–288 (author: И. БОЖИЛОВ); И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Цар Симеон Велики...*, p. 124–125; Д. АНГЕЛОВ, С. КАШЕВ, Б. ЧОЛПАНОВ, *Българска военна история...*, p. 268–272; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 256 (author: И. БОЖИЛОВ); J. HALDON, *The Byzantine Wars...*, p. 91–93; M.J. LESZKA, *Symeon I Wielki...*, p. 177–180.

⁵⁸ *Leonis Diaconi Historiae*, rec. C.B. HASE, Bonn 1828 [= CSHB, 30] (cetera: LEON DIAKONOS), p. 124.10–12.

⁵⁹ THEOPHANES CONTINUATUS, p. 390.15–21; GEORGIOS MONACHOS, col. 1140, §19; SYMEON MAGISTROS AND LOGOTHETES, p. 306.172–179; SKYLITZES, p. 205.45–55. Only Skylitzes grants the Byzantines the victory at Katasyrtai. On the reasons for that, see the note by J.-C. Cheynet in JOHN SKYLITZES, *A Synopsis of Byzantine History, 811–1057*, ed. et trans. J. WORTLEY, Cambridge 2010, p. 199, n. 46. For a discussion of the battle, see В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.2, p. 391sq; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 288–289 (author: И. БОЖИЛОВ); И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Цар Симеон Велики...*, p. 125–127; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 256–257 (author: И. БОЖИЛОВ); M.J. LESZKA, *Symeon I Wielki...*, p. 181–185.

⁶⁰ THEOPHANES CONTINUATUS, p. 401.3 – 402.7; GEORGIOS MONACHOS, col. 1153, §9; SYMEON MAGISTROS AND LOGOTHETES, p. 316.126 – 317.151; SKYLITZES, p. 215.2–25. В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *Исто-*

even with all the *tagmata* present, so there likely were some of the eastern *themata* – at least those lying close to the Bosphorus which were hastily summoned to defend the capital, for the Bulgarian offensive caught the Byzantines off guard. The sources, however, mention nothing of these and hence we would better content ourselves with what is explicitly said.

Tsar Symeon died on 27th May 927 and with him the dream of a united Byzantine-Bulgarian empire. Certain concessions were made with the peace treaty of the same year, which helped set the relations between the “old” and the “new” empire on a new footing. This agreement would last for nearly forty years⁶¹.

The first, albeit short, war between Byzantium and Bulgaria after the death of Symeon began in 966/967. To this end, the then emperor Nicephoros II Phokas (963–969), purportedly angered by the demand for the annual tribute due to Bulgaria and the lack of reaction to Magyar horsemen’s passing through the realm to raid the Byzantine European possessions, assembled a host of uncertain composition⁶² and invaded the north of Thrace capturing a few of the fortresses defending the Bulgarian frontier⁶³. Bulgaria, still ruled by the elderly tsar Peter (927–969), did not retaliate though. This campaign, it seems, was a mere show of force and some modern scholars even doubt that it has happened at all⁶⁴.

рия..., vol. I.2, p. 411–412; S. RUNCIMAN, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus and his Reign. A Study of Tenth-Century Byzantium*, Cambridge 1929, p. 88; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 290 (author: И. БОЖИЛОВ); Д. АНГЕЛОВ, С. КАШЕВ, Б. ЧОЛПАНОВ, *Българска военна история...*, p. 275; И. БОЖИЛОВ, *Цар Симеон Велики...*, p. 137–138; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 258 (author: И. БОЖИЛОВ); M.J. LESZKA, *Symeon I Wielki...*, p. 194–195.

⁶¹ On the peace treaty of 927, see В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.2, p. 516–535; S. RUNCIMAN, *The Emperor Romanus Lecapenus...*, p. 97–101; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 370–371 (author: В. ТЪПКОВА-ЗАИМОВА); J. SHERARD, *Bulgaria: the Other Balkan “Empire”*, [in:] *The New Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. III, C. 900 – c. 1024, ed. T. REUTER, Cambridge 1999, p. 579; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 272–277 (author: И. БОЖИЛОВ); and most recently: M.J. LESZKA, *Symeon I Wielki...*, p. 231–233; *Българска национална история*, vol. III, p. 407–416 (author: П. ПАВЛОВ); M.J. LESZKA, K. MARINOW, *Part One. Chapter III. Peace*, [in:] ИДЕМ, *The Bulgarian State in 927–969. The Epoch of Tsar Peter I*, Łódź 2018 [= BL, 34], p. 47–53.

⁶² Perhaps their core were the regiments of the *tagmata* (see the next note).

⁶³ Leon the Deacon calls the Byzantine army στρατιὸν ἀξιόμαχον (LEON DIAKONOS, p. 276.23 – 277.28).

⁶⁴ Most notably С.А. ИВАНОВ, *Византийско-болгарские отношения в 966–969 гг.*, ВВ 42, 1981, p. 88–100 and more recently К. MARINOW, *Hémos comme barrière militaire. L’analyse des écrits historiques de Léon le Diacre et de Jean Skylitzès au sujet de la campagne de guerre des empereurs byzantins Nicéphore II Phocas en 967 et de Jean I Tzimiscès en 971*, ВМд 2, 2011, p. 444–455; A. KALDELLIS, *Streams of Gold, Rivers of Blood. The Rise and Fall of Byzantium, 955 A.D. to the First Crusade*, Oxford–New York 2017 [= OSHC], p. 54–57 (esp. p. 55–56 where Leon the Deacon’s account is challenged). See also В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.2, p. 570–573; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 389–390 (author: В. ТЪПКОВА-ЗАИМОВА); Д. АНГЕЛОВ, Б. ЧОЛПАНОВ, *Българска военна история през Средновековието (X–XV век)*, София 1994, p. 14; С. ПИРИВАТРИЧ, *Самуиловата държава (обхват и характер)*, София 2000, p. 50–51; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 295–296 (author: И. БОЖИЛОВ); П. ПАВЛОВ, *Векът на цар Самуил*, София 2014, p. 29–30; *Българска национална история*, vol. III, p. 432–436 (author: П. ПАВЛОВ); M.J. LESZKA, K. MARINOW,

This short conflict was a harbinger of a new, much longer and violent struggle. The Rus' attack on Bulgaria, instigated by the Byzantine Empire beforehand, brought ruin to the once prosperous state. The invaders were soon perceived as a threat by the Byzantines as well and they initiated a carefully planned campaign to drive them away. This done, they also took advantage of the situation to occupy the core territories of the Bulgarian Empire, taking captive its ruler Boris II (969–971) who was later stripped off his vestments and regalia in Constantinople, thus symbolically abolishing the independent Bulgarian state through the dethronement of its monarch⁶⁵.

What was the act of dissolution in Byzantine eyes, was in fact only a temporary state of affairs. The Cometopuli brothers rebelled in the Bulgarian West and the war that broke out then (976) was to last until the very final breath of the First Bulgarian Empire in 1018. It was probably the one most important goal of emperor Basil II (976–1025) to put an end to this emergent state, whose rulers were seen by the Byzantines as nothing more than usurpers (*apostatai*)⁶⁶.

For most of the time, our sources of this war are conspicuously silent about the troops the Byzantine side employed. The first major military campaign Basil II led himself against Bulgaria was that of 986 when the Byzantines headed to Triaditza/Serdica (modern Sofia) and tried to capture it in a futile siege. In the retreat, the Byzantine army was taken by surprise and utterly defeated, with the emperor barely escaping with his life, this lucky outcome being attributed by the chronicler Stepanos of Taron to his Armenian guardsmen⁶⁷. Our main sources, i.e., Leon the

Part One. Chapter VII. Last Years of Peter's Reign (963–969), [in:] ИДЕМ, *The Bulgarian State in 927–969...*, p. 138–148.

⁶⁵ On the Byzantine war against Svyatoslav of Kyiv, see the latest analysis of the source material in A. KALDELLIS, *Streams of Gold, Rivers of Blood...*, p. 62–63, 68–74, and the notes therein. On the abolishment of the Bulgarian state in 971 and the preceding events, see the latest discussion in П. ПАВЛОВ, *Векът...*, p. 43–52; M.J. LESZKA, K. MARINOW, *Part One. Chapter VIII. The Year 971*, [in:] ИДЕМ, *The Bulgarian State in 927–969...*, p. 159–170; K. MARINOW, *Post mortem cara Piotra, czyli upadek Bułgarii w latach 969–971*, [in:] Z.A. BRZOZOWSKA, M.J. LESZKA, K. MARINOW, *Piotr I Święty, car bułgarski (ok. 912–969). Maria Lekapena, saryca bułgarska (ok. 912–?963)*, Kraków 2018, p. 245–279 (inaccessible); Г.Н. НИКОЛОВ, *Из историята на Самуилова България*, София 2022, p. 41–44.

⁶⁶ The sources on the Cometopuli are summed up in English translation in V. ТЪРКОВА-ЗАЙМОВА, *Bulgarians by Birth. The Cometopuls, Emperor Samuel and their Successors According to the Historical Sources and Historiographic Tradition*, Leiden 2017 [= ECEEMA]. On Basil II's wars against Bulgaria, see P.M. STRÄSSLE, *Krieg und Kriegführung...* (here p. 64–66).

⁶⁷ LEON DIAKONOS, p. 171.1 – 173.11; SKYLITZES, p. 330.10 – 331.51; *Ioannis Zonarae Epitome Historiarum*, libri XIII–XVIII, rec. T. BÜTTNER-WOBST, Bonn 1897 [= CSHB, 49], p. 548.6 – 549.18; *The Universal History of Stephanos Taronec'i*, ed. et trans. T. GREENWOOD, Oxford 2017, p. 285; *Histoire de Yahya ibn Sa'ïd d'Antioche*, ed. I KRATCHKOVSKY, A. VASILIEV, [in:] PO, vol. XXIII, Paris 1932 (cetera: ЯНУА), p. 418–419. For a comment on the campaign and the battle that followed, see В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.2, p. 665–676; П. МУТАФЧИЕВЪ, *История...*, p. 372–373; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 405–408 (author: П. ПЕТРОВ); Д. АНГЕЛОВ, Б. ЧОПЛАНОВ, *Българска военна*

Deacon and Skylitzes, tell that Basil had mustered his forces before invading Bulgaria⁶⁸. Mathew of Edessa, a 12th-century Armenian chronicler, even states that *the emperor Basil gathered together troops from all the lands of his empire*⁶⁹. Skylitzes mentions two Byzantine generals by name – Leon Melissenos (by that time *magistros*, perhaps with no military office) and the *domestikos ton Scholon of the West* Stephanos Kontostephanos. Skylitzes, echoed by Ioannes Zonaras, is also the one who informs us that the emperor somehow had kept the conceived campaign secret from Bardas Phokas, the then *domestikos ton Scholon of the East*, and the other eastern *strategoï*. All this implies, it seems, that in the attempted siege of Triaditza and the later Byzantine defeat only certain *tagmata* and western *themata* were present – an imposing, yet not particularly numerous force⁷⁰.

After a decade, the fortunes of the two combating sides were reversed (in ca. 996/997) when Samuel was barely saved by his son and future tsar Gabriel Radomir (also known as Romanos to the Byzantines) at the river Spercheios. Again, it is nearly impossible to ascertain the contingents in the Byzantine host due to the sparsity of the main source (i.e., Skylitzes' *Synopsis Historion*)⁷¹. As it was commanded by the *archon of all the West* (presumably *domestikos ton Scholon of the West*) Nikephoros Ouranos⁷², it is reasonable to suggest it consisted mostly of the *tagmata* and local *themata* which happened to be nearby at this moment.

история..., p. 39–44; С. ПИРИВАТРИЧ, *Самуиловата държава...*, p. 110–111; С. HOLMES, *Basil II and the Governance of Empire (976–1025)*, Oxford 2005 [= OSB], p. 491–493; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 318–320 (author: И. БОЖИЛОВ); P.M. STRÄSSLE, *Krieg und Kriegführung...*, p. 76–77, 88–89, 239–240; П. ПАВЛОВ, *Векът...*, p. 114–115; *Българска национална история*, vol. III, p. 516–518 (author: П. ПАВЛОВ); A. KALDELLIS, *Streams of Gold, Rivers of Blood...*, p. 95–96; K. MARINOW, *Liczebność wojsk bizantyńskich...*, p. 104–105. On the Armenian guardsmen of the emperor, see J.-C. CHEYNET, *Basil II and Asia Minor*, [in:] *Byzantium in Year 1000*, ed. P. MAGDALINO, Leiden–Boston 2003 [= MMe, 45], p. 86. After the final capitulation of Bulgaria in 1018, we also hear of Armenian soldiers, who had been taken prisoner by tsar Samuel (SKYLITZES, p. 363.54–56).

⁶⁸ τὰς δυνάμεις ἀνειληφῶς (LEON DIAKONOS, p. 171.2); τὰς Ῥωμαϊκὰς ἀθροίσας δυνάμεις (SKYLITZES, p. 330.11–12).

⁶⁹ *Armenia and the Crusades Tenth to Twelfth Centuries. The Chronicle of Mathew of Edessa*, trans. A.E. DOSTOURIAN, Lanham–New York–London 1993, p. 40, §37). This, however, contradicts the Byzantine sources, both earlier and less removed from the war theatre (see below).

⁷⁰ The actions of the Byzantines and the lack of confidence shown for most of the campaign also seem to confirm indirectly this conclusion.

⁷¹ SKYLITZES, p. 341.22 – 342; cf. ЯНУА, p. 446–447. On the battle, see В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.2, p. 696–699; П. МУТАФЧИЕВЪ, *История...*, p. 375–376; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 410 (author: П. ПЕТРОВ); С. ПИРИВАТРИЧ, *Самуиловата държава...*, p. 120–121; P.M. STRÄSSLE, *Krieg und Kriegführung...*, p. 78 (on the chronology, see n. 25), 90–91, 241–242; J. HALDON, *The Byzantine Wars...*, p. 160–161; П. ПАВЛОВ, *Векът...*, p. 130–131; *Българска национална история*, vol. III, p. 527, 530 (author: П. ПАВЛОВ); A. KALDELLIS, *Streams of Gold, Rivers of Blood...*, p. 113–114.

⁷² On Nikephoros' official command at that point, see J.-C. CHEYNET, *Basil II and Asia Minor...*, p. 87–88; С. HOLMES, *Basil II...*, p. 409–410; P.M. STRÄSSLE, *Krieg und Kriegführung...*, p. 407, n. 1097; and the most recent study of M. MASTERSON, *Nikephoros Ouranos, Eunuchism, and Masculinity during the Reign of Emperor Basil II*, В 89, 2019, p. 409.

The ten-year truce the Byzantines concluded with the Fatimid Caliphate in 1000⁷³ gave them free hand to pursue more aggressively their goals in the Balkans against their bitter rival Bulgaria. However, what we know of the war in the first decade of the 11th c. is barely enough for a reconstruction of the main events in it, often chronologically confused, and as a rule, our primary informer Ioannes Skylitzes (and his immediate sources) is less than informative on the composition of the Byzantine armies that waged this war. Therefore, the transfer of *tagmata*, previously stationed in the eastern frontier region, can only be deduced but not confirmed by contemporary material. Even for a seemingly massive campaign such as that of 1014 which ended with the Byzantine triumph at Kleidion, there is no information whatsoever on the subject that interests us here⁷⁴.

The *Scholai of the West* along with the *tagmata of Thessalonike* under Konstantinos Diogenes participated in the last military campaign of Basil II against Bulgaria in the winter of 1017–1018⁷⁵. And indeed, the *strategoï/katepanoi/doukes* of Thessalonike, Philippopolis and Dyrrhachion are the ones most frequently mentioned by Skylitzes in the war against Samuel and his heirs, with Thessalonike serving as a military hub and centre of Byzantine authority for the whole region. However, on some occasions at least, the troops of these commanders included in their ranks recruits from the East, as for instance the *doux of Thessalonike* Ioannes Chaldos' soldiers from *Armeniakon* and *Boukellarion* mentioned in a document (*sigillion*) from the year 995⁷⁶.

⁷³ Y. LEV, *The Fatimids and Byzantines 10th–12th Centuries*, GA 6, 1995, p. 204–205.

⁷⁴ On this decisive battle, see В. ЗЛАТАРСКИ, *История...*, vol. I.2, p. 729–742; П. МУТАФЧИЕВЪ, *История...*, p. 380–381; *История на България*, vol. II, p. 416 (author: П. ПЕТРОВ); Д. АНГЕЛОВ, Б. ЧОЛПАНОВ, *Българска военна история...*, p. 55–56; С. ПИРИВАТРИЧ, *Самуиловата държава...*, p. 136–137; С. HOLMES, *Basil II...*, p. 499–500; P.M. STRÄSSLE, *Krieg und Kriegführung...*, p. 80, 242–243; *История на средновековна България...*, p. 325 (author: И. БОЖИЛОВ); J. HALDON, *The Byzantine Wars...*, p. 161–162; П. ПАВЛОВ, *Векът...*, p. 153–156; *Българска национална история*, vol. III, p. 551–554 (author: П. ПАВЛОВ); A. KALDELLIS, *Streams of Gold, Rivers of Blood...*, p. 121–122.

⁷⁵ SKYLITZES, p. 356.39–41. Cf. P.M. STRÄSSLE, *Krieg und Kriegführung...*, p. 244.

⁷⁶ *Actes d'Iviron I. Des origines au milieu du XI^e siècle*, No. 8, ed. J. LEFORT et al., Paris 1985 [= AAth, 14], p. 153.1–2 (where Ioannes is *doux of Armeniakon, Boukellarion and Thessalonike*). In all probability, this means that he commanded troops of the former two *themata* organised the way the *tagmata* were, but not the whole effectives of these *themata*. It is also interesting to note, for it seems to be intentional, that his regiments are listed in the same hierarchical order as the one found for the corresponding *themata* in the *Escorial taktikon/Taktikon Oikonomidès* (cf. N. OIKONOMIDÈS, *Les listes de préséance...*, p. 265.1, 4, 35). See also the comments in C. HOLMES, *Basil II...*, p. 364, n. 150; p. 404, n. 15; A. KALDELLIS, *Streams of Gold, Rivers of Blood...*, p. 112–113. These contingents might have been left by Basil II himself, since it is in the same year (995) that he departed for the East, having previous waged war against Bulgaria with “all his troops” (ΥΑΗΥΑ, p. 442). This downright exaggeration may indeed testify a large-scale campaign which is almost wholly omitted in the Byzantine sources (see, among others, P.M. STRÄSSLE, *Krieg und Kriegführung...*, p. 240–241).

2. The sphragistic data

What does the sigillographic material tell us about the participation of Byzantine troops from across the Bosphorus in the wars with the First Bulgarian Empire? Unfortunately, not much. There are a dozen seals belonging to military administrators and commanders from Asia Minor and the adjacent regions found in present-day Bulgaria, dating from the 8th to the beginning of the 11th c. Some of these are likely connected to their activities in the domain of war in these territories, although other, non-military correspondence should not be wholly ruled out (see the discussion above).

N., ...and *komes of the God-protected imperial Opsikion* (8th – middle of the 9th c.)⁷⁷

Two fragments of lead seals, one of which was found near the village of Kalugerovo, Haskovo province, the other with unknown provenance.

As the dating is too broad, it is difficult to make any reasonable suggestion as to which events it may be related to.

Nikephoros, *imperial spatharios and strategos of Kibyrrhaïoton* (9th c., before the middle of the century?)⁷⁸

This person is known from a single seal, currently kept at the National Museum of History in Sofia but its exact origin is unknown. Almost certainly it has been found on the territory of Bulgaria.

The Kibyrrhaïotai constituted a naval *thema* in south-western Anatolia and it is relatively safe to assume that their *strategos* Nikephoros participated in one of the numerous Byzantine campaigns against Bulgaria where the fleet was also involved either in support of the land army or as a means of transport; which campaign is impossible to tell.

Niketas, *imperial strator, tourmarches and paraphylakes of Abydos* (middle of the 9th c.)⁷⁹

His seal, according to its editor prof. I. Jordanov, most probably originates from the southern regions of the modern municipalities of Nova Zagora or Stara Zagora.

A century later the *tourmarches of Abydos* was a subordinate to the *strategos of Aigaion pelagos*, another naval *thema*⁸⁰. This Niketas might have sent a message to someone in the region outlined above which will have been in the border zone between the two empires by the mid-9th c.⁸¹ Otherwise, he may have participated

⁷⁷ I. JORDANOV, *Corpus...*, vol. I, 56.1, p. 133; IDEM, *Corpus...*, vol. III, No. 1368–1369, p. 462.

⁷⁸ IDEM, *Corpus...*, vol. I, 41.1, p. 108; IDEM, *Corpus...*, vol. III, No. 1314, p. 446.

⁷⁹ IDEM, *Corpus...*, vol. I, 1.1, p. 25; IDEM, *Corpus...*, vol. III, No. 1100, p. 399.

⁸⁰ CONSTANTINO PORFIROGENITO, *De Thematibus*, rec. A. PERTUSI, Città del Vaticano 1952, p. 83.18–20. Cf. J. NESBITT, N. ΟΙΚΟΝΟΜΙΔΗΣ, *Catalogue...*, vol. III, p. 73–74.

⁸¹ On the extend of the Bulgarian-controlled territories in Thrace during the period, see Б. БОРИСОВ, *До тук стига България (Бележки по хронологията и развитието на селищната мрежа*

at the head of a naval squadron in one of the military operations against Bulgaria of this century, most likely that of 863, when the fleet is known to have sailed along the coast in support of the land forces. If we slightly alter the date to a more recent one, Niketas could be brought in line with the time of the Symeon wars when the navy is equally well-attested.

N., ...and *strategos of Thrakesion* (9th c.)⁸²

A half-preserved specimen from the medieval fortress near the village of Melnitsa (Yambol province), in the close vicinity of Adrianople, where hundreds of lead seals have been found.

Contingents from *Thrakesion* are attested in the Byzantine-Bulgarian wars from the reign of Constantine V to that of Michael I and about the time of the latter is in our opinion the most likely period when the seal in question was dispatched, especially in the light of the hypothesis that the fortress near Melnitsa was in fact the medieval Bersinikia⁸³.

Balantios, *imperial protospatharios and strategos of Anatolikon* (9th–10th c.)⁸⁴

A single lead seal, found near today's town of Silistra.

Its finding in the region of Dorostolon/Drăstăr may have something to do with the Byzantine negotiations with the Magyars who, incited by the Byzantines, invaded Bulgaria at the very end of the 9th c. In fact, the Magyars blockaded Symeon in Dorostolon after being ferried across the Danube by the Byzantine fleet. It is beyond any doubt that the findspot of Balantios' seal lies deep within Bulgarian-held territory for the whole of the period right until the late 960s.

Ioannes (?), *patrikios, imperial protospatharios and strategos of Thrakesion* (9th–10th c.)⁸⁵

A lead seal from Debeltos/Deultum (nowadays the village of Debelt, Burgas province).

The place where the seal was found, changed hands often in the course of the 9th–10th c., which makes any estimates of the moment when the correspondence

в Южна България по времето на Първото българско царство), [in:] *Оттука започва България. Сборник с материали от Втората национална конференция по археология, история и културен туризъм „Пътуване към България”*, Шумен 2011, p. 231–251; Н. КЪНЕВ, *Към въпроса за българското и византийското политико-териториално присъствие в Северна Тракия през IX в. (с оглед данните на сфрагистиката)*, [in:] *ИДЕМ, Византинобългарски студии*, В. Търново 2013, p. 33–47; Б. БОРИСОВ, *Археологически данни за българско-византийските отношения през Ранното средновековие от територията на днешна Южна България (VII – третата четвърт на X в.)*, Епо 26, 2018, p. 373–382.

⁸² I. JORDANOV, Z. ZHEKOVA, *Catalogue of Medieval Seals at the Regional Historical Museum of Shumen*, Shumen 2007, No. 1279, p. 442.

⁸³ Cf. P. SOUSTAL, *TIB*, vol. VI, p. 205 (Bersinikia), p. 353–354 (Melnica).

⁸⁴ N. BĂNESCU, *O colecție de sigilii byzantine inedite*, București 1938, No. 6 (inaccessible); I. JORDANOV, *Corpus...*, vol. I, 8.1, p. 37–38; *ИДЕМ, Corpus...*, vol. III, No. 1113, p. 402–403.

⁸⁵ I. JORDANOV, *Corpus...*, vol. I, 35.3, p. 93; *ИДЕМ, Corpus...*, vol. III, No. 1277, p. 441–442; *ИДЕМ, Z. ZHEKOVA, Catalogue...*, No. 292.

was sent and its very purpose even more conjectural. It is almost certain that regiments from the *thema of Thrakesion* participated in the battle of the river Achelous (flowing less than 50 km off Debeltos), and as the dating does not contradict such an assumption, it is fairly plausible, albeit untenable, that Ioannes, or whatever his actual name was, was among those unfortunate enough to find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Philippos, *imperial protospatharios and strategos of Aigaion pelagos* (10th c.)⁸⁶

In I. Jordanov's view, the original seal, now lost, comes from the region of Burgas.

It shares a lot of typological features similar to that of the previous one and is in all probability near-contemporaneous to it. With this in mind, the Achelous battle is also a possible explanation for its appearance there, especially given the fact that *Aigaion pelagos* was a naval *thema* and the Byzantine fleet took part in the operations from the outset to its closure, including the evacuation of those who had saved themselves behind the walls of the nearby towns of Mesembria and Anchialos.

Adralestos, *patrikios and domestikos of the exkoubitoi and the East* (last quarter of the 10th c.)⁸⁷

If Jordanov's reading is correct, this person exercised authority (in quite an unusual manner) over two of the three divisions of the *exkoubitoi*. As the seal was most probably found in present-day north-eastern Bulgaria, it may testify to its owner's participation in one of the campaigns in this region spanning from the Byzantine-Russian war of 970–971 to the Byzantine re-conquest in 1000. It is the earliest seal of a *tagmata* commander designates as *of the East* that has been found in Bulgaria and the only one that is within our time frame.

Jordanov also identifies this Adralestos with the owner of an earlier seal as *protospatharios and ek prosopou of Thrace and Ioannoupolis*⁸⁸. If this attribution is correct, we would have a firm *terminus post quem* for both seals and this would be 971 when the Bulgarian capital of Preslav was renamed Ioanno(u)polis in honour of the victorious emperor John I Tzimiskes (969–976)⁸⁹.

Diogenes, *protospatharios and strategos of Anatolikon* (971–?)⁹⁰

Four specimens are known from Bulgaria: one was found in Preslav, another in the municipality of Dulovo (Silistra province), while the other two, kept at the museums of Preslav and Stara Zagora respectively, are with unknown provenance.

⁸⁶ I. JORDANOV, *Corpus...*, vol. I, 4.1, p. 33–34; IDEM, *Corpus...*, vol. III, No. 1111, p. 402.

⁸⁷ IDEM, *Corpus...*, vol. I, 7.3, p. 37; IDEM, *Corpus...*, vol. III, No. 1027, p. 372.

⁸⁸ И. ЙОРДАНОВ, *Печатите от стратегията в Преслав (971–1088)*, София 1993, No. 290, p. 144–145; I. JORDANOV, *Corpus...*, vol. I, 35B.19, p. 102; IDEM, *Corpus...*, vol. III, No. 1269, p. 439.

⁸⁹ SKYLITZES, p. 298.9–10.

⁹⁰ И. ЙОРДАНОВ, *Печатите...*, No. 199–200, p. 112; I. JORDANOV, *Corpus...*, vol. I, 8.2, p. 38; IDEM, *Corpus...*, vol. III, No. 1114–1117, p. 403.

The title of *protospatharios* is somewhat low-rank for the most important military administrator, that of *Anatolikon*, in the last third of the 10th c. Given the find-spots of the seals, the campaign against Svyatoslav of 971 is the most likely “candidate” for Diogenes’ involvement. Whatever the exact moment these seals were used, this could hardly postdate the first years of the 11th c.

Leon Melissenos, *patrikios and strategos of Anatolikon* (970s – before 985)⁹¹

This stage in Leon Melissenos’ career, otherwise unattested in the narrative sources, is known from a seal found at the so-called *strategia* of Preslav⁹². It precedes 985 when he was appointed *doux of Antioch*, for he had already been a *magistros* by then⁹³.

Konstantinos (?), *patrikios and strategos of Cappadocia* (end of the 10th c.)⁹⁴

Two seals struck with the same *boulloterion*, both from the *strategia* of Preslav. Could this *strategos of Cappadocia* have participated in the re-conquest of Moesia in 1000, or this is simply a token of a private correspondence of a slightly later date?

Christodoulos, *imperial protospatharios and strategos of Samos* (10th–11th c.)⁹⁵

One seal is found at the *strategia* of Preslav and the other originates from Silistra.

This Christodoulos was *imperial protospatharios and strategos of Samos* from ca. 971 to ca. 1000 or in the subsequent period but almost certainly before the 1020s.

Lastly, we have to consider a small group of three individuals holding various offices within the *thema/tourma of Mesopotamia*: **N.**, *...and strategos of Mesopotamia* (second half of the 9th c.)⁹⁶; **N.**, *imperial spatharios and ek prosopou of Mesopotamia* (late 9th – early 10th c.)⁹⁷; **Leon**, *imperial spatharokandidatos and tourmarches of Mesopotamia* (10th c.)⁹⁸. I would like to argue that in all probability at least the former two were connected to a *thema* subsequently known as *Mesopotamia in*

⁹¹ И. ЙОРДАНОВ, *Печатиме...*, No. 201, p. 112–113; I. JORDANOV, *Corpus...*, vol. I, 8.3, p. 38; IDEM, *Corpus...*, vol. II, No. 458, p. 287; IDEM, *Corpus...*, vol. III, No. 1118, p. 403–404.

⁹² This edifice is notable for the large number of Byzantine lead seals and blank lead disks found during the excavation process (a total exceeding 700), pointing to its administrative function (hence the name given to it). As such it was established after the Byzantine conquest of 971. Cf. И. ЙОРДАНОВ, *Печатиме...*, p. 15–23.

⁹³ ЯНУА, p. 416.

⁹⁴ И. ЙОРДАНОВ, *Печатиме...*, No. 278a-6, p. 137–138; I. JORDANOV, *Corpus...*, vol. I, 39.1, p. 107; IDEM, *Corpus...*, vol. III, No. 1311–1312, p. 445–446.

⁹⁵ И. ЙОРДАНОВ, *Печатиме...*, No. 320, p. 157–158; I. JORDANOV, *Corpus...*, vol. I, 67.2, p. 156; IDEM, *Corpus...*, vol. III, No. 1429–1430, p. 476.

⁹⁶ I. JORDANOV, *Corpus...*, vol. I, 48.1, p. 124–125; IDEM, *Corpus...*, vol. III, No. 1348, p. 456–457.

⁹⁷ IDEM, *Corpus...*, vol. I, 48.3, p. 125; IDEM, *Corpus...*, vol. III, No. 1350–1352, p. 457–458. This one, as *ek prosopou*, was with uncertain military functions anyway.

⁹⁸ IDEM, *Corpus...*, vol. I, 48.4, p. 125–126; IDEM, *Corpus...*, vol. III, No. 1353–1355, p. 458–459; И. ЙОРДАНОВ, *Печати на византийската администрация в България (971–1118)*, Шумен 2019, No. 67–69, p. 61.

the West. This opinion is corroborated by the geographic proximity and the generally early dating. One needs to keep in mind that the “other” *Mesopotamia*, in the homonymous historical region, was probably not established until the early 10th c.⁹⁹

The presence of the last person, however, is even harder to interpret. Unlike the previous two, whose seals were found exactly where W. Seibt believes *Mesopotamia of the West* was situated (the region between the rivers Tundzha, Maritsa and Arda), Leon’s bullae originate exclusively from Silistra. The matter becomes even more complicated in the light of the evidence of the *Escorial taktikon* (also known as *Taktikon Oikonomidès* and dated within 971–975) where we find four distinct *Mesopotamiai* administered by a *doux*, *katepano* and two *strategoi*¹⁰⁰, while *tourmarchai of Mesopotamia* appear only in the sphragistic record¹⁰¹.

Be that as it may, none of the aforementioned is a likely candidate for an office in any eastern Mesopotamia that may have existed at the exact moment the lead seals were struck.

* * *

The present survey makes it clear that larger or smaller portions of the eastern troops of the Byzantine Empire participated quite regularly in the wars against early medieval Bulgaria. How frequently they appear in the sources, however, varies greatly. Obviously, during the first two and a half centuries after the Bulgars’ settling by the shores of the Danube and the foundation of the Bulgar state there, the eastern *themata* are almost omnipresent on the field of battle, whereas, beginning from the last years of tsar Symeon’s reign, we find no mention of them in the narrative sources. One of the reasons for that might have been their diminishing military potential compared to that of the *tagmata*. Here the sphragistic data comes in handy, for it provides substantial information, albeit not that conclusive, of commanders of diverse military units exchanging letters with locals, officials or other military men stationed in the Balkans, whether in time of peace or war.

⁹⁹ On *Mesopotamia* and *Mesopotamia in the West*, see E. MCGEER, J. NESBITT, N. OIKONOMIDES, *Catalogue of the Byzantine Seals at Dumbarton Oaks and the Fogg Museum of Art*, vol. IV, Washington, D.C. 2001, p. 134–135; I. JORDANOV, *Corpus...*, vol. I, p. 124; and more recently and extensively W. SEIBT, “*Mesopotamia des Westens*” – *Ist es im 9. und 10. Jahrhundert südlich der Marica zu suchen?*, [in:] *Нумизматични, сфрагистични и епиграфски приноси към историята на Черноморското крайбрежие*, Варна 2008, p. 100–114; Н. КЪНЕВ, *Бележки върху измеренията на българо-византийския конфликт...*, p. 690–691. See also Н. КЪНЕВ, *Към въпроса за българското и византийското политико-териториално присъствие...*, p. 38–41, where the author outlines two periods in the early (i.e. before its being documented in the *taktikon* of the 970s) existence of this military district: from the peace treaty of 816 to the reign of khan Malamir (831–836) and in the middle – second half of the century (*terminus ante quem* 899).

¹⁰⁰ N. OIKONOMIDÈS, *Les listes de préséance...*, p. 263.29, 31, 265.12, 269.16.

¹⁰¹ Apart from the one in the discussion, see for instance E. MCGEER, J. NESBITT, N. OIKONOMIDES, *Catalogue...*, vol. IV, 55.16, p. 141–142.

Interesting observations could be made on the frequency with which specific eastern *themata* are encountered in the Balkans during the period under consideration (Table 1). Such information is found for almost the entire period under consideration (between 712/713 and 995). However, for 813–995, our narrative sources keep silent about exactly which eastern units fought against Bulgaria, mentioning, only occasionally, individual elite *tagmata* and guard regiments from the capital (for instance, the *hetaireia*)¹⁰². For this period of almost three centuries, each of *Thrakesion* (or its *strategos*) and *Anatolikon* appear thrice (in 756/759/760, 774 and 812, and 811, 813 and 995, respectively), *Opsikion* twice (712/713 and 812), while each of *Optimaton* and *Boukellarion* – only once: the former in 774 and the latter in 995. Several border *kleisourai* are also mentioned among the participants in the battle of Bersinikia (813) – *Lycaonia*, *Cilicia*, *Isauria*, *Cappadocia*, *Galatia*¹⁰³. It is apparent at first sight that most of the aforementioned *themata* are located in the Aegean and the Propontic littoral, and in Bithynia, just across the Bosphorus, which finds numerous logical explanations. On the one hand, their relatively close proximity to the theatre of war means that they could be hastily mobilised and transported to the Balkans using the fleet, thus responding to an urgent situation quickly and without causing major logistic issues, otherwise inevitable when large armies had to cross vast stretches of land. On the other hand, the *themata* in question did not immediately border the Arabs and the Caucasian Christians. In other words, they served as an army reserve and were dispatched wherever needed – be it the Balkans or the eastern frontier zone. Had the Muslims penetrated westwards to the Aegean, they would fight in and for their own districts and fortresses, while for most of the time, they remained available for offensive operations in the West.

The sphragistic data comes almost exclusively from the period from the early 9th to the late 10th c., thus filling the chronological gap left by the narrative sources. We find the majority of the aforementioned *themata* on lead seals from Bulgaria¹⁰⁴ but this time our evidence goes further east, in fact as far as *Cappadocia*. The most striking presence, however, is that of certain naval *themata* (*Aigaion pelagos*, *Kibyrrhaioton* and *Samos*) along with their subordinate units (the *tourma of Abydos*, part of the *thema of Aigaion pelagos*) otherwise absent from the narrative records of the Byzantine-Bulgarian wars. This comes as no surprise, though, as the Byzantine navy often accompanied the field armies when campaigning against Bulgaria was concerned. However, as is the case with sigillography without proper context, it is impossible to judge of the nature of the correspondence, now lost, only by the seals that are extant. Furthermore, as many of these seals date from the

¹⁰² This could partly be explained by different approaches on the part of the authors of chronicles and histories after Theophanes who may have been less interested in conveying such information in their works. This, however, could hardly be the only reason for their conspicuous silence.

¹⁰³ Some of them are otherwise unattested and may have not been officially recognised as *kleisourai*.

¹⁰⁴ All but the *Optimatoi*.

late 10th c. and are found predominantly in what is now north-eastern Bulgaria, it is plausible that some of them were related to the Russo-Byzantine war of 970–971 or the subsequent Byzantine occupation of these lands after ca. 1000. One needs to keep in mind that since these lands were more often than not under direct Byzantine control from John Tzimiskes' campaign until the early 11th c. and onwards, these seals may have served other, non-military needs related to official duties or private exchange of letters. This supposition could be further enforced by the fact that nearly half of the extant specimens from the late 10th – early 11th c. that we have examined were found at the *strategia* of Preslav – an administrative building established as such by the Byzantine authorities in the former Bulgarian capital.

In general, the sigillographic evidence seems to corroborate the narrative sources. The military districts most often found on lead seals from Bulgaria are, in the majority of cases, those that historians and chroniclers mention the most while narrating the Byzantine-Bulgarian wars. These are the *themata* of Western and Central Asia Minor, while those of the Northeast (*Armeniakon* and the smaller *themata* that sprang from it) are entirely missing from the record. It does not mean they have never taken part in these conflicts but only confirms what we already know, that their participation was less regular compared to that of their counterparts to the west who were well-suited to fight both in the Caucasus, Armenia, Mesopotamia and Syria and in the Balkans.

At times of utmost danger to the central government in Constantinople and when there was enough time to do that, seemingly the entire field army currently available was dispatched to deal with the threat the Bulgars posed. The narrative sources present the situation this way on several occasions: first, at the O(n)glos in 680, in some of Constantine V's campaigns (certainly so in 763 and 766, and perhaps in 774), in the long campaign of 811, at Bersinikia two years later, at Boulgarophyon in 896 and finally at the Achelous in 917. Such a course of action was a particularly risky one. It was part of the Byzantine strategic thinking that active combat on two fronts was to be avoided at any cost. Thus, one of the main prerequisites for a massive campaign in the Balkans with the participation of sufficient detachments of the eastern troops was either a peace treaty or at least a temporary cease-fire with the Arab Caliphate, its successor states or the local emirates, or a serious internal conflict that ruled out an intervention on the part of the Muslim adversaries of the Christian empire. In fact, we know from the historical sources that in 680, 763, 766, 811, 813 and in Basil II's campaigns after 1000, one of these conditions had been fulfilled beforehand. When this had not been done, the defences of the Byzantine East were greatly compromised, as it was during the wars with Symeon. An interesting remark in *Theophanes Continuatus* makes it clear that the opposite was also true – when there was peace with Bulgaria, the *themata of Thrace and Macedonia*, intended to safeguard the western approaches to the capital city of Constantinople, were customarily transferred to fight alongside

their Anatolian brothers-in-arms¹⁰⁵. All this shows that the *theme* system in its initial form was far more mobile and flexible than is commonly held. Until the *tagmata* rose in numbers and took an ever more independent role, the *themata* had been well-capable of fulfilling their duty to repel enemy attacks or go on the offensive themselves, even when these had to cross vast spaces in order to reach their destination. On the contrary, the disappearance of the eastern *themata* from the sources about the Byzantine-Bulgarian wars seems to coincide with them becoming more static and defensively oriented, in a period when it was the *tagmata* that acted as the spearhead of the Byzantine reconquest.

It becomes apparent from our examination of the evidence, and it is a well-known fact already, that the Byzantine Empire suffered a serious lack of manpower in the Balkans at the time the Bulgars arrived there. This problem proved unsolvable even with the extensive establishment of new *themata* at the end of the 8th and the beginning of the 9th c. following the subjugation of some Slavic tribes and the reinstatement of Byzantine authority over once lost territories of the peninsula¹⁰⁶. The *theme* system there had remained somewhat underdeveloped (at least compared to that of Anatolia) until it was gradually supplanted by the regiments of the *tagmata*. The reasons for that could be many but the most likely explanation seems to be that there was not enough arable land and not enough population to be converted into *stratiotai* in the limited stretches of land west of the capital firmly in Byzantine control for most of the period from the late-7th to the early 11th c. Moreover, these territories had been severely affected by the raids and the settlement of various peoples, most of whom proved reluctant to submit to the empire, while others, in their turn, were subdued by the Bulgarians in the 9th and early 10th centuries.

Strangely enough, the written sources explicitly mention the participation of eastern troops usually in grandiose military fiascos such as those of 680, 811 and 917. At the same time, the successful campaigns of Basil II's reign seemingly occurred with very little help from the eastern *themata* and the regional *tagmata* recruited in the East. Their western counterparts, however, were almost ever-present, occasionally acting as the vanguard of the campaigning army (e.g., the battle of Kleidion, when Nikephoros Xiphias, then *strategos of Philippopolis*, outflanked the Bulgarian fortifications). This says enough of the growing Byzantine military power at the end of the 10th and the beginning of the 11th c., but also manifests a gradual yet profound change in the balance between *tagmata* and *themata* in favour of the former. The mobility and battle worthiness of the

¹⁰⁵ THEOPHANES CONTINUATUS, libri I–IV, p. 258.45–47.

¹⁰⁶ A total of seven new *themata* were created in this period: *Thessalonike*, *Macedonia*, *Mesopotamia*, *Cephalonia*, *Peloponnese*, *Dyrrhachion* and *Strymon*, adding to the two already existing – *Thrace* and *Hellas* (cf. A.-K. WASSILIOU-SEIBT, *Reconstructing the Byzantine Frontier on the Balkans (late 8th–10th c.)*, REB 73, 2015, p. 229–235; Н. КЪНЕВ, *Бележки върху измеренията на българо-византийския конфликт...*, p. 680–681).

professional *tagmata* made them emperors' first choice from the second half of the 10th c. onwards. These came to dominate the aggressive warfare of the Byzantines in that period, while the *themata*, especially those of the interior, were left to decay, a process which became irreversible during the later part of the so-called “short” eleventh century¹⁰⁷.

Table 1

Individual eastern *themata* and their *strategoi* (*komites* in the case of *Opsikion*, and *domestikoi* in that of *Optimaton*) found in the narrative sources and sphragistic material for the wars with Bulgaria (late 7th – early 11th c.).

event \ <i>thema</i>	<i>Opsikion</i>	<i>Thrakestion</i>	<i>Optimaton</i>	<i>Anatolikon</i>	<i>Boukellarion</i>	<i>Kibyrrhaioton</i>	<i>Aigaion pelagos</i>	<i>Cappadocia</i>	<i>Samos</i>
defence of Constantinople (712/713)	✓								
battle of Beregaba (756/759/760)		✓							
battle of Lithosoria (774)		✓	✓						
battle of Pliska/Värbitsa pass (811)				✓					
defence of Constantinople (812)	✓	✓							
battle of Bersinikia (813)				✓					

¹⁰⁷ This work owes a great deal to the numerous comments made by Prof. Kiril Marinow (University of Lodz) and the two anonymous reviewers. They all helped immensely and I use the opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to them.

<i>thema</i> event	<i>Opsikion</i>	<i>Thraakesion</i>	<i>Optimaton</i>	<i>Anatolikon</i>	<i>Boukellarion</i>	<i>Kibyrrhaïotou</i>	<i>Aigaion pelagos</i>	<i>Cappadocia</i>	<i>Samos</i>
defence of Thessalonike (995)				✓	✓				
number of lead seals (date)	1 (8 th – mid- dle of the 9 th c.)	2 (9 th c.; 9 th –10 th c.)		3 (9 th –10 th c.; 971–?; 970s – before 985)		1 (9 th c., before the middle of the century?)	2 (middle of the 9 th c.; 10 th c.)	1 (end of the 10 th c.)	1 (10 th – 11 th c.)

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